

magic soaking my spine by youngamerican

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Summary:

Steve Harrington survived the apocalypse. Twice. Now he has to survive community service with Billy Hargrove, which is honestly ten thousand times worse.

1. chapter one

When Steve looks back, trying to pinpoint the moment when his axis began its slow yet inevitable tilt, he will put the blame utterly and completely on Dustin.

It had started with a favor. A small, ridiculous, favor.

“What,” Steve said flatly, “is that.”

Dustin grinned up at Steve. “It’s a Tesla coil! It’s named after this really cool inventor dude named Nikolai Tesla. He actually had this huge rivalry with Thomas Ed—”

“I’m gonna cut you off there,” Steve said, frowning, as he leaned over the experiment. “I guess the better question is how that,” he gestured at the Tesla coil, “is going to fit in there.” He gestured at his car.

Dustin was not deterred. “We can hang part of it out the window.”

“Out the window,” Steve repeated.

“Yeah, yeah,” Dustin said, already kneeling to pick it up. Steve scrambled to help and together they lifted Dustin’s experiment into the back of Steve’s very nice (and he would like to keep it that way) BMW. Steve returned to the front seat of the car and rolled down the back left window as Dustin, breathing noisily, pushed the whatever-it-was-called in the last few inches and slammed the car door shut.

“Told you it’d fit,” Dustin said, smile never fading for a second as they gazed upon the fruits of their labor. The top of the thing was protruding a good foot from the window of the car, but not enough that it would be a hazard when Steve was driving. Steve was mostly worried that something on it would break and, god forbid, begin leaking in his back seat. Who knew what kind of energy that thing was powered by and in what ways it could ruin beautifully upholstered leather seats.

Despite all that, Steve didn’t say anything because Dustin was still smiling at him like Steve was the second coming and Dustin still

smelled faintly of Farah Fawcett hairspray (Steve's most sacred and trusted secret) so Steve could refuse him nothing. He didn't even want to. Yeah, it was kind of strange to occasionally hang out with a bunch of 13-year-olds all of the sudden, but there are bonds formed when you almost die side-by-side with someone. Multiple times.

So, Steve might not be able to have a beer with Dustin and the rest of the geek squad, but he could sit and talk to them and help them out in the ways that he understood how, like hair tips, and girl tips, and driving Dustin to school with his science fair project because his mom had to go to work early that week all the way in another county.

Steve, satisfied the experiment probably wouldn't explode and ruin his car, got in. Dustin, however, remained outside the car, and suddenly found his hands very, very interesting.

"Well?" Steve said to him expectantly. "Are we leaving or what?"

"Well." Dustin said. "About that."

And that was how Steve ended up with two kids crammed in the backseat, and Dustin riding in the front with a very uncomfortable Mike in his lap.

Steve glanced into the backseat through the rearview mirror.

"Everyone okay back there?"

Max, who was basically underneath part of Dustin's experiment, sent back a withering glare in response. Lucas looked less cramped but still deeply uncomfortable. "Let's hurry up and get there before Dustin's time machine garbage explodes on us."

Dustin turned violently in his seat to face Lucas, eyes hurt. "It's a Tesla coil, Lucas!"

"What is the point of this thing? It's for a high school science fair, not the N....n....the thing!"

"Nobel Prize," Max supplied.

Dustin looked even more distressed. "Mr. Clarke helped me work on

this thing for months. It shoots electricity,” he said, looking at everyone’s less than impressed reactions. “*Electricity!*”

“Yeah, but because of that thing, we’re all squished in here and also it’s *freezing*,” Max said.

Steve, huddled as close as possible to his car’s air conditioner, silently agreed. It was March in Indiana and there were at least a couple of inches left on the ground from the last snowfall.

The fight went on from there. Mike was mostly annoyed that he had to basically crouch in the front seat while Dustin was turned around, screaming at Lucas about the importance of science, while Lucas rolled his eyes and Max interjected truthful, but slightly mean, comments every few moments like, “None of this even matters, can we please stop arguing? High school science fairs are a joke,” and so on.

It was strange how quickly normalcy had returned to their small group in Hawkins. Well. Semi-normalcy. Steve suppressed a shudder at the sudden influx of memory—the feeling of hot breath and panic swooping over him in a wave. Steve admired the kids’ ability to bounce back. Their tenacity. This is not to say the kids were unaffected—Dustin was a little more thoughtful, Lucas more subdued and careful. Mike had the return of Eleven to help ease him into this brave new world, and who knew how Will was honestly doing. But life went on. It had to.

When the fight showed no sign of slowing, and Steve was questioning his choice to hang out around 13-year-olds even more than usual, he finally raised his voice. “Enough! Lucas, stop teasing Dustin about his stupid science experiment. Dustin, I’m sorry I said your experiment was dumb, but really, I don’t get it, and I never will. Let’s just sit in silence, okay? We’re almost to school, anyway.”

And that would have been the end of it, if the newly created silence had not been broken by the wailing of police sirens.

Steve pulled over.

Officer Powell exited his car and strolled over to Steve’s, tapping on

the glass of the driver's side window.

Steve, all grins and politeness, rolled it down immediately. "Hello, Officer Powell!"

Powell nodded. "Harrington." He looked over the car's interior, taking in the two kids crammed in the front seat, and the two kids equally crammed in the backseat, along with Dustin's ungainly science experiment.

He turned back to look at Steve. "Mr. Harrington, do you have any idea why I pulled you over?"

Steve racked his brain. Because he had too many people in his car and (probably) a dangerous science experiment hanging out the window? "No idea, sir." He tried turning on some of the old patented Harrington charm, ideal for getting you out of detention and for persuading teachers to increase paper deadline, guaranteed. "Is that a new hat?"

Officer Powell was not impressed. "It is not." He flipped open his ticket book and eyed it for a moment before he began writing. "I pulled you over because of that." Without taking his eyes off his notepad, he gestured directly across the street.

Steve groaned.

"Oh c'mon, I was taking these kids to school and they're freaking out back there and fighting and it was really distracting, sir, and so I didn't notice the sign. Can't you cut me some slack?"

Officer Powell didn't lift his eyes from his paper. "Could you please tell me the time, Mr. Harrington?"

Steve glanced at his car's clock. "7:45, sir."

"And what time does the speed limit go back up in the school zone?" Powell asked, writing away on his little sheet of paper.

Steve looked back to the street sign. "8:00, sir."

Powell ripped off the ticket from his notebook and handed it to Steve.

“That’s what I thought. Driving 45 in a 25, Mr. Harrington, and a school zone at that. With snow on the roads.” He shook his head. “Very dangerous.”

He turned back to his police vehicle, and before he got in he looked back at Steve, tipping his hat as he spoke. “That’s a \$110 dollar ticket, Mr. Harrington. But,” his eyes scanned across the body of Steve’s very, very expensive car, “I doubt it’ll be a hardship. Have a nice day now, and slow down.”

Steve numbly looked at the ticket in his hand. He resolved to not panic about it now, definitely not in front of the kids, who were all looking at him wide-eyed and guilty.

“You guys, it’s okay,” he said, “I should have been paying more attention. Don’t sweat it.”

Dustin, looking especially guilty, eyed the ticket dubiously. “A hundred and ten bucks is a lot of cash, Steve. Maybe we could, I don’t know, help you get the money?” He looked at Max, Lucas, and Mike who all nodded furiously.

Steve stuffed the ticket in his pocket and turned his key in the ignition. “Listen, I told you guys not to worry about it and I mean it. Everything will be fine.”

Everything was not fine.

See, the thing was, ever since Steve had told his parents that he would, first of all, *not* be attending business school after graduation, and that, second of all, he had zero plans on taking over the family business after his dad retired, things had become strained at home, to say the least.

A one hundred and ten dollar speeding ticket would have been no sweat for his parents to cover for him as recently as two months ago. But now they were barely speaking, and Steve was sure that his dad would either outright say no to paying for it, or use it as a bargaining chip in their exceedingly depressing game of “How to Guilt and Blackmail Steve into Going to Business School.”

“Well,” Hopper said over the phone, chewing on an apple and making unhappy noises, “there’s always community service.”

Steve perked up from where he had been laying prone and defeated on his bed. “Community service?”

“Yeah.” Steve heard Hopper shuffle some papers around on his desk. “There’s a program for teen drivers and various other miscreant types to do community service instead of dealing with the ticket, so that it won’t show on their record, and they don’t have to pay the fine.” Steve heard Hopper take a sip of (what Steve assumed was) coffee and place the mug back down, hard. “I honestly would have thought you’d pay the ticket and be done with it, Harrington.”

Steve slumped back and threw an arm over his eyes. “Well,” he sighed into the phone, “home life isn’t making it super easy to ask for a hundred and ten dollar get out of jail free card right now.”

Hopper paused for a moment, and his voice came back with a harder edge. “Everything okay at home, Steve?”

Steve sighed again. “Yeah, yeah, it’s just big,” he threw his arm out in a wide accompanying gesture, “*future* stuff happening right now and my dad and I can’t seem to agree, seeing as how he sees me as some kind of businessman and I. Don’t.”

Hopper gave his own sigh of understanding. Steve could hear him lean back in his squeaky office chair. “Parents, man. That’s tough.”

Steve would have laughed at the understatement if it didn’t also make him want to cry. “Well, it could be worse. They haven’t taken away my car yet or anything.”

Hopper understood the implied “as long as they don’t know about this ticket.”

“Well, kid, my best advice is to bite the bullet and take the community service. It’s a nine-week thing you can do on the weekends. Meet me at the station this Saturday at eight and we’ll get it all sorted out, okay?”

Steve agreed, hung up on an incredibly understanding Hopper, and

pulled his pillow over his face so he could scream.

Steve pulled in at 7:50 AM that Saturday morning, parking behind the station so that no one (his dad) could see his car parked there and ask questions. The secrecy was especially important since Steve's dad had no idea that his son was doing community service, and actually thought Steve was attending a Saturday morning study group for English. To be fair, it was an extremely believable lie, seeing as how English was his worst subject, but who the hell has a study group at eight in the morning on a Saturday?

Steve walked into the station, unsure of where to go. Florence, the receptionist, spotted him and corralled him into Hopper's office. "He'll be here," she grimaced at her watch, "soon. Wait in here for a bit dear, and he'll sort all of this out for you." With a sweet but firm smile, she shut the door behind her and left Steve alone with his thoughts—the only place he wanted to be even less than community service.

Steve sat in the office, eyeing the mess that was Hopper's desk. There were stacks and stacks of manila folders placed haphazardly across its surface, several half-drunk cups of coffee, and a few picture frames littered across the desk's perimeter, facing Hopper's seat.

Steve picked one up, and felt a sharp sting of sadness. Hopper, looking incredibly young, was grinning delightedly at his daughter as she looked back up at him. It looked like it was from a birthday party when Sarah was really little, maybe two or three. Steve looked at the picture a few more moments and then put it back on Hopper's desk, gently.

It was lucky he had placed the picture back on Hopper's desk, because he probably would have dropped it in fright when the office door flew open with a crash. The figure in the doorway was looking back over his shoulder towards Florence, cigarette in mouth, rolling his words as he kept the cigarette firmly enmeshed between his lips. "Listen lady, I know where Hopper's office is, I've kind of been here before, you see." Steve heard Florence's voice make some attempt at a reply before the man cut her off. "Yeah, how about I don't do that, but we'll say I did." He pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and pointed at her with it for emphasis. "Cool?" He put the cigarette back

in his mouth. “Cool. Glad that’s settled.”

He turned to Steve and his face lit up. Steve sank down into the seat, wanting to disappear.

“Steve fucking Harrington. What’s a golden boy such as yourself doing down here with us lowlifes this fine Saturday morning?”

Steve shook his head as Billy Hargrove strode past him to plant himself across the desk, firmly in Hopper’s seat.

“You probably shouldn’t be sitting there.”

Billy blew smoke into Steve’s face. “Why?” he asked, grinning.

“Because that’s Hopper’s seat.”

Billy mouthed this answer back to himself and raised his eyebrows, considering it. He leaned back in the seat and placed two heavy booted feet onto the now even dirtier surface of Hopper’s desk. “Harrington, Harrington, Harrington,” Billy said in mock disappointment. “Imagine my surprise when I come in for my usual time wasting bullshit, and who do I see?” He took a long drag off his cigarette and blew it out slowly. “I see you. And I think to myself for a moment,” he turned his head towards the ceiling in a mock pose of contemplation, “could it be that Harrington, Steve Harrington, is actually a little cool? And not Hawkins, Indiana cool but like, someone with actual balls in the real world cool? But then you,” and he turned his eyes back to Steve and they were shining with false disappointment, “told me not sit in Hopper’s chair and now you’re back to being the same boring loser you were yesterday.”

Steve didn’t rise to the bait. “Good to know.”

Steve had forgotten the intensity of Billy’s gaze. They hadn’t spoken, not really, since the time Billy had beaten the shit out of him. Things had changed—namely, Billy had stopped going after Steve’s throat like it was his job. Billy could be the new king of the high school. Steve didn’t give a shit. He was happy to step aside.

What was most surprising to Steve was that Billy would actually show up for community service. Steve would have put him down as

the type to agree to it in return for a more lenient sentence, and then never go, consequences be damned.

Billy had sharp teeth and even sharper eyes, and he did not look like the kind of boy to be hindered by consequences in the slightest.

Steve contemplated his hands for a moment, tracing along recently acquired scars with the tips of his fingers. He felt strangely filled with the desire to say something. Anything. Billy clearly did not share his compulsion to fill the silence.

Steve cleared his throat and felt ridiculous.

“Hey man, I uh, wanted to say, after that. Thing. That happened. At the Byer’s house. I’m sorry.”

Billy’s smirk fell off his face and he stared at Steve, trying to figure out the trick.

“*You’re* sorry?” he repeated in disbelief. His cigarette was long gone, and Billy stubbed it out absently.

“Yeah well, I don’t regret punching you. You were acting like a psycho, and if you ever put hands on Lucas Sinclair again, or any of those kids, I’ll do it again. I feel bad for how far it went. We didn’t need to fight, man.”

“I beat the shit out of you,” Billy said slowly, incredulously, “and you are saying sorry to me?”

Steve sighed in frustration and ran his hands through his hair, “No, I’m saying—”

He was interrupted by the door once again being slammed open, and was greeted by the sight of Hopper with a donut in his mouth and three coffee cups balanced precariously in his hands. Steve stood up quickly to grab them and Hopper took the donut out of his mouth with a quick thanks. He looked at Billy. “Off.” Billy moved to the second seat next to Steve’s without a word of complaint and minimal eye-rolling.

Hopper picked up the coffee cups from where Steve had grouped

them together on the desk and placed one in front of Steve, one in front of Billy, and one in front of himself. "Drink." They all sat in silence for a moment and Steve appreciated the bitter slide of the coffee down his throat.

Hopper smacked his lips together in satisfaction as he drained his mug and placed it back on his desk, grouping it with the small collection of coffee cups he already had assembled there. Billy and Steve likewise placed their cups back on the desk and looked at Hopper in anticipation of the day's events.

"Well," Hopper sighed. "We might as well get this thing started."

The three of them piled into Hopper's Chevy and didn't speak at all until they pulled up in front of the Hawkins Rec Center.

"Are we here to teach underprivileged losers how to play basketball or some shit?" Billy sneered. Hopper looked back at him and smiled. "Not exactly."

Looking at the giant dusty piles of rusted equipment and moldy uniforms that Hopper had led them to, Steve sincerely wished his punishment would be so simple as to teach kids how to play basketball. No, this was much, much worse.

Hopper had led them to a small warehouse. Inside were stacks upon stacks of old rotting boxes and shelving units that went back for a good eighty feet. There was a deep layer of dust on every surface and a strong smell of mildew in the air.

Steve could only gaze in despair at the decrepit storage facility he would be working in the next nine weeks, but Billy responded by kicking over a stack of boxes. He turned to stare at Hopper incredulously. "Are you fucking serious right now? Cleaning out this whole shit show? This will take forever."

"Actually," Hopper said, glancing down at his watch as he leaned against the door frame, "I think you'll find it'll take around nine weeks. Coincidentally, that's how long you and Harrington have to serve your community service for. Well, this go around at least, Hargrove."

Billy made no effort to hide his indignation. Hopper ignored it. "You'll be moving all the stuff that isn't salvageable around back. A garbage truck will come every day to pick the pile up. And you're not going to dump everything out there that you see, understand? I'm going to have people report back to me on the job the two of you are doing. I want this place cleaned out and organized from top to bottom. This storage facility has had crap piling up in it since the sixties, and it's about damn time it got cleaned out. So, you two boys are going to dedicate six hours of your Saturdays, for nine weeks, to get the damn thing done. Unless you guys would rather me call your parents and sort this out a different way?"

Billy and Steve both immediately replied no and ignored the mutual note of panic in their voices.

Hopper nodded and his eyes softened. "It really won't be that bad. I've got some buckets out here, some rags, soap, brooms— all the good stuff. There's a generator out back so you won't freeze to death, either. Work hard and it'll be done sooner than you think."

Billy and Steve nodded with varying degrees of respect (Steve: appropriate, Billy: begrudging) and turned to face the prospect of the next nine weeks of Saturdays.

"Harrington, a word?" Hopper called out from the doorway.

Billy was already lighting up a cigarette. "I'll wait for you to come back so we can start, your majesty!" he called out after Steve's retreating back while Steve grimaced in anger.

"Before you even start," Hopper began, but Steve cut him off.

"What the hell, Hopper! Nine weeks with that douchebag? You've got to be kidding me. Do you, or do you not, remember how he basically beat me unconscious a few months ago? There was blood," he gesticulated wildly with his hand in front of his face, the other hand perched on his hip in a fist, "everywhere."

Hopper sighed, "I know, I know. But believe me when I say that I'm doing this because," he glanced back in Billy's direction and lowered his voice, "I think you'll be a good influence on him."

“A good influence?” Steve repeated in disbelief.

Hopper shushed him and pulled him farther away. “Yes, you moron, a good influence. Listen, you guys are around the same age, right? You both like,” he gestured vaguely, “cars....? Basketball....? Whatever, you both like teenage guy shit and you both clearly care way too much about your hair.”

Steve touched his hair, offended.

“My point is,” Hopper continued, “you’re steady. You’re a good man, Harrington, and Billy doesn’t have that in his life.” Before Steve could even open his mouth to ask what exactly that meant, Hopper shook his head with a grimace. “I can’t go into details. All I can say is the kid’s a grade A asshole, but he’s a kid. There’s still a chance that, with the right people in his life, he can turn out semi-decent. And you could be one of those right people.” Steve turned his head and crossed his arms, shaking his head. “All I’m saying is, give the kid a chance. Besides, you don’t have a choice. This is supposed to be a punishment,” he placed his hand on Steve’s shoulder, pleadingly, “but I’m hoping it can work out to be more than that for the both of you. Try to be his friend or something, okay? I think the shithead’s just really mad. And lonely.”

Steve sighed, and then shrugged. Hopper slapped him on the back and led him back to the storage room. “Good man.”

Steve and Billy worked silently for the most part. Billy, despite the chill, had already stripped off his jacket and Steve pondered the incredible cold tolerance of someone from California. By the time they broke for lunch, tearing at the roast beef sandwiches and cold bottles of Coke Hopper had left them with, Steve thought he might as well get to know the boy he’d be spending the next nine Saturdays with.

“So,” Steve said around a mouthful of bread and beef. “California.”

Billy looked over the rim of his coke bottle as he chugged it, pulling it away and messily wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. “Yeah, what about it?”

“Well, like, what part are you from?”

Billy took a bite of his sandwich. “Santa Monica.”

Steve nodded like he knew anything about Santa Monica. “Was it... cool? Like, did it have beaches and all that?”

Billy smiled condescendingly. “Yes Harrington, it had beaches and all that.”

Nine weeks, Steve reminded himself. Nine weeks. “Did you ever...go surfing?” he said, stretching his lackluster knowledge of Californian activities to the limit.

Billy rolled the now-empty bottle of coke around in his hands and smiled, the feral edges wearing away briefly. “You watch too many movies.”

Steve threw up his hands. “Look man, all I know about California comes from TV and the Beach Boys. So sue me.”

Billy just laughed. Steve took that to mean it was safe to ask another question. “Why did you even move here from California?”

Billy’s face went from open to closed so quickly Steve imagined he could hear a door slamming shut. “That’s *definitely* none of your business, Harrington.”

Steve felt irritated and more than a little frustrated. Talking to Billy was like walking through a minefield. “Sorry I asked. I was just trying to be nice.”

Billy looked at him strangely for a long moment and then moved to toss the glass coke bottle into the pile outside. “Yeah, that’s your problem right there. Always trying to be nice.”

The afternoon drew to a close and the two boys waited outside, not speaking, for Hopper. Billy had gone through an entire pack of cigarettes that day, and Steve stared as Billy ground his latest one underneath the heel of his boot.

Billy, noticing, rolled his shoulders and twisted his hands above his

head as he stretched. “You got a problem with smoking, Harrington?”

Steve looked away and was saved from replying by the appearance of Hopper’s police car. Once they got inside, Hopper glanced back at them in the rearview. “How’d it go? Get a lot done?”

Steve made a non-committal “it was okay” noise, while Billy snorted and said, “Barely scratched the surface. Shit in there is older than I am.”

Eight more weeks, Steve thought to himself as he looked out the window toward blurry, indistinct neighborhoods. Eight more weeks.

Their next Saturday was hardly any better than the last. Billy appeared to relish the physical labor, the lifting and the carrying of old gym equipment and strange smelling boxes.

Everything seemed to have accumulated in this one storage room, piling endlessly on top of itself. There were punctured soccer balls, basketballs, unraveled baseballs, and torn apart tennis rackets. There were rusted barbells and moth eaten trampolines. At one point Steve even found what he believed was part of an ancient diving suit. They would sometimes hold up some of their more outlandish finds and make faces to each other, but mostly they worked in silence. Steve took this as a marked improvement to Billy actively antagonizing and/or wanting to beat the shit out of him.

When conversation did begin again, it surprisingly began with Billy.

They had been dealing with an incredibly damp and moldy box of old color guard uniforms, both of them attempting to push it into the garbage pile outside without actually having to touch it, when Billy spoke up. “So, whatever happened with that Wheeler chick?”

Steve, pretending like the mention of her name didn’t give him the sensation of a full body shock, shrugged.

“She’s with that total dickweed Byers now, right?”

Steve’s shoulders tightened and he felt a swoop of anxiety gather low in his stomach. This was not a conversation he wanted to have with anyone, never mind Billy fucking Hargrove. “We broke up and she

dates him now. It's that simple," he said shortly.

Billy leaned against the wall and looked at Steve appraisingly. "Doesn't seem that simple."

"Yeah, well, it is."

Billy shrugged and turned back to pushing at the nearest box of dingy uniforms, but not before he said, "Seems to me you're better off without that bitch, anyway."

Steve reacted before he could think. He kicked out furiously, knocking down the nearest pile of ancient gymnastics mats. A cloud of dust shimmered in the air. Billy hadn't even flinched.

"Listen, Hargrove. I don't give a fuck about the way you talk about your friends. But you don't call Nancy a bitch, and you definitely don't do it in front of me."

"So, what are you gonna do?" Billy asked, eyes aglow.

Steve considered his options. What he wanted to do was go over there and punch the smirk right off of Hargrove's arrogant fucking face. The only thing stopping him was the look of disappointment he knew he'd get from Hopper. Hopper, who was counting on him to be a good influence. Hopper, who had given him this chance to pay back his ticket so he wouldn't keep getting shit from his old man.

"I am. Going to get back to work," Steve replied, turning back to his pile of boxes.

He didn't even have to look back at Billy to imagine the tension draining out of his shoulders, his grin slipping away, the confusion in his eyes. He had wanted a fight and Steve had refused to give him one.

You had to start somewhere.

The rest of that afternoon passed uneventfully. Billy seemed slightly apologetic, even strangely unsure, and didn't bring up Nancy again.

Steve had not seen Billy in school since the Saturday community

service sessions had begun.

This was not unusual. The one class they'd had together, PE, had ended last semester. Now they were in the final stretch before graduation and all everyone cared about was making it to the end of the year and finally being done with Hawkins—at least, that's what people said. Steve knew that the Venn diagram of people who talked the most shit about Hawkins and the people who will probably spend the rest of their lives there is a circle. Hawkins was like the Bermuda Triangle of the Midwest.

Steve both loved and hated that. Loved it because he had no idea what he wanted to do with his life and Hawkins was safe—unbearably safe. College? Could he even handle that? He barely passed most of his classes last semester, and that was with Nancy's help—something he couldn't count on again. His father's promise of a secure job and neat, predictable future loomed on the horizon in front of him.

He could stay in Hawkins, take over his dad's business, and get married to some girl. Not Nancy, of course. Not anymore. Someone else.

Steve stood at his locker and slammed it shut, clearing his head of its racing thoughts.

He nearly missed Billy in the school parking lot, which was kind of ridiculous considering how much of a spectacle Billy usually made of himself—Billy had the hair, the clothes, the car, and he wanted to make sure everyone knew it.

Steve almost rolled his eyes at the group of girls fawning over Billy while he draped himself casually over his open car door. Yet again, Steve marveled at Billy's tolerance for the cold. His shirt was undone almost to his navel.

Steve opened his driver's side door to toss his backpack in and then Billy was there.

"Harrington," he said, nodding.

Steve leaned against the car door, eyeing Billy curiously. The threat

of violence hung around Billy like a perpetual shroud, but Steve didn't sense any hostility towards himself at the moment.

Billy glanced to where the girls were grouped around his car, then back to Steve. "I need a favor."

Steve smiled. "Well, this is interesting. What's the favor, and what do I get in return?"

Billy scowled. "How about I promise not to beat the shit out of you again?"

Steve faked taking a punch to the stomach and doubled over. "Oh, Hargrove, right where it hurts. Good one. Solid insult, suitably threatening, I'd give it a 9 out of 10." Billy didn't even crack a smile. Steve straightened up. "Okay man, what's the favor?"

Billy flicked his eyes back towards his car again, then at the ground, then back at Steve. "You've got Barton for math right? For trig?"

Steve nodded.

Billy reached into his jacket pocket to pull out his pack of cigarettes and placed one between his lips. "Well, that shit is like gibberish to me." He took a long drag and exhaled slowly. "But I heard you were pretty good at it. So I was thinking you could bring some of your math shit on Saturday—let me take a look at it." Steve narrowed his eyes and Billy grinned, half-amused and half-annoyed. "Not to cheat off of you, dipshit. Just to get some fucking clue of what I should be doing." He abruptly crushed his barely smoked cigarette underneath his boot. "And don't worry about the Chief. He'd probably cream himself if he knew we were talking about math."

Steve considered Billy for a moment.

"Yeah, you can borrow it. Maybe in return, try to be a little less of a dick?"

Billy grinned, and it was one of his rare genuine smiles. "Not a fucking chance, Harrington."

Steve was unsettled around Billy. One minute he was quiet and thoughtful, silently looking over the math homework that Steve had brought him, a coke bottle held loosely in one hand and school papers in the other. The next minute he seemed too big for his skin. He paced and chainsmoked and moved boxes at a near frantic pace.

The day ended with Billy handing over the papers roughly, practically pushing them back into Steve's hands. "What are you making in that class?" he asked.

Steve folded the papers into his back pocket. "I think like a 94, after this last test. I'm decent at trig."

Billy pulled out a cigarette and began rolling it between his fingers. "Thanks, man. For letting me look at your stuff, I mean. That dick's handwriting is like fucking hieroglyphics."

Steve snorted. Mr. Barton had notoriously horrific handwriting but Steve could make it out okay.

"No problem." Steve thought that this might be the most normal beginning to a conversation the two of them had ever had. He decided to push it, just a little. To see.

"Your sister really seems to like Hawkins. She's a cool kid," he offered.

Billy sniffed and toed the ground. "She's like, twelve, she likes everything."

Steve laughed and Billy seemed surprised but pleased, despite himself.

"Have you met your sister? I think the only thing she genuinely likes is skateboarding."

Billy smiled a little and rolled his eyes. "If that isn't the goddamn truth. Kid would sleep with that thing if she could. Probably does."

Steve paused and then...*pushed* a little more.

"I saw she got a new one a while ago. Your parents get that for her?"

Billy scoffed and placed the cigarette in his mouth. "No, no, no. That'd be from the bank of Billy Hargrove." He lit the cigarette and took a shaky breath, inhaling and closing his eyes for a moment.

"Why'd you buy her a skateboard?"

Billy opened his eyes and bared his teeth in a facsimile of a smile. "Because I broke the last one."

"And you wanted to make it up to her?"

Billy breathed smoke into Steve's face. "You could say that."

Steve waved his hand through the cloud of smoke and reached out. "Can I bum one?"

Billy's smile turned genuine once more. "Harrington! A smoker!" He held out his pack.

Steve gave a lopsided smile. "Sometimes. Not so much these days." He looked at Billy slyly as he inhaled. "Nancy didn't like it."

"I'm shocked, Harrington. Absolutely shocked. You're telling me Ms. Perfect didn't want her boyfriend partaking of the nicotine?"

Steve shook his head. "She's really not what you think, man. Nancy's not some stuck up prude. She just looks that way. Kind of." It was his turn to blow smoke in Billy's face, who didn't even have the decency to flinch.

"What's she like, then?" Billy asked, smile lazy but barbed.

"Nancy's smart as hell. Beautiful. Funny. Loyal." He waved a hand in front of himself. "Too good for me, that's for sure."

Billy made a low considering noise in the back of his throat and leaned against the wall, staring at Steve with hooded eyes. "That the type you usually go for? All buttoned up on the outside, wild on the inside?"

Steve abruptly felt out of his depth, but he answered honestly. "I like...interesting. Nancy's interesting."

“Interesting,” Billy repeated.

Steve could only nod.

“That’s interesting,” Billy said.

Before Steve could reply, he heard a loud horn cut through the quiet afternoon air. “Hopper’s here,” he said needlessly.

“I know,” Billy said, still gazing at Steve with too much intention. Too much *attention*.

When they got into the back seat of the Chevy, Hopper turned back and looked Steve over, inhaling deeply. “You smoke, Harrington?”

Steve avoided Billy’s gaze. “No, of course not.”

Notes for the Chapter:

i tried to keep the dialogue relatively 80s appropriate so if you spot any anachronisms, that's on me buddy. i love this hot dumpster fire of a relationship. also 110 bucks in the early 80s was approx 250 bucks in now money.

also i'm bonesache on tumblr. hit me up!

2. chapter two

Notes for the Chapter:

3 things:

1. this story got away from me so it's looking like it'll be a 3 or 4 parter. im updating the chapter list accordingly. this one is shorter than the last but it felt like the right place to end it.
2. the kudos and comments (comments especially!) from last chapter were SO heartening and wonderful, thank yall so much!
3. can anyone spot the line i shamelessly ripped off from rumble fish?

After that, Steve started to see Billy around school. A lot.

He would come across Billy in the hallways where they exchanged brief nods—

“Harrington.”

“Hargrove.”

—and then continue on their ways.

Nancy pulled him aside at his locker after almost a week of this, mouth agape. “Since when are you on a speaking basis with Billy Hargrove, Steve?”

Steve shrugged. “I kind of just know him now. From around.”

“From around? Where do you even see Billy? You guys have none of the same classes, and unless he’s started hanging out around thirteen-year-olds too, then you definitely don’t have the same friends.”

Steve slammed his locker shut. “Well,” he said calmly, “I used to have a lot more but, y’know, things have changed in the past year for some reason, Nancy.”

She was immediately apologetic. “Oh, I didn’t mean that. I really didn’t. That was insensitive and stupid.” She reached up to brush his arm. “I just think he’s scary. There’s something wrong with him.”

“There’s something wrong with who?” Jonathan said, coming up and bumping into Nancy’s side gently, eliciting a wide smile.

Steve used to make her do that, he thought.

“Uh, there’s something wrong with *you* if you guys don’t get the meatloaf at lunch today,” Steve said, blurting out the first thing he could think of. He didn’t want to talk about Billy with anyone else. It felt private. He detached gently from Nancy’s touch. “It’s delicious.”

Jonathan wrinkled his nose. “I’m pretty sure it’s yesterday’s hamburgers mixed with ketchup or something, man.”

Steve patted his belly and smiled wide. “Like I said, delicious.”

The three of them laughed, with Jonathan and Nancy unanimously declaring Steve was full of shit, and Steve protesting he was actually full of tasty meatloaf, and then headed their separate ways. Nancy’s head inclined towards Jonathan as they walked together to class in a manner that used to make Steve feel so...*important*, in ways he couldn’t even begin to articulate. Now he felt kind of sad looking at it, but mostly grateful that Nancy still had someone. She deserved to be happy. If Steve hadn’t done that then it was right that Jonathan should get to try.

He saw Billy later that day in the school parking lot, breath steaming in the frigid March air. He still wasn’t dressed for the weather, but at least he had a jacket on this time.

Billy noticed him too. He raised his hand and shouted across the parking lot, “See you tomorrow, Harrington!”

Steve grinned, shook his head, and drove away.

The next day was their fourth Saturday together. They were halfway through the first hour that morning when Billy brought up their

classmate Jacob—specifically, the fact that Jacob’s parents were going to be out of town that night.

“Apparently he’s got some hot shit party planned,” Billy said. “You going?”

Steve was eyeing a box, trying to figure out if a mouse had nested in it or not. “Uh, probably not. Not really my thing anymore.”

“Yeah. About that,” Billy said. “Why isn’t it ‘your thing’ anymore?”

“Because it isn’t.” Steve prodded the box.

“Yeah, but *why* is what I asked you, Harrington.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “That shit’s getting really old, *Hargrove*.”

“It just doesn’t make sense to me,” Billy said, stopping to sit on a ragged storage container, “that you would give all of that up.”

Steve was pretty sure there were no mice in the box. He lifted it. “Why does it bother you so much?”

Billy shrugged. “I’m a curious guy.”

Steve set the box down gingerly in the pile outside and rushed back into the storage room, shivering. He tapped the container Billy sat on with his foot in a ‘get your ass back to work’ gesture and grinned at Billy’s scowl. “You know what they say. Curiosity killed the cat.”

“Yeah,” Billy agreed. “But satisfaction brought it back.”

Later that afternoon, Billy brought it up again.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you at a party since Halloween.”

Steve nodded. That made sense, considering what happened that night and afterwards—afterwards consisting of nightmares, nausea, and an overwhelming dislike of pointless high school parties where the main goal was to get wasted and laid. Steve could barely sleep for months—how could he give a shit about keg stands when he had night terrors that consisted of countless rows of sharp teeth and

blood, blood, blood.

“You got some girl you’re spending your weekends with? Is that it, man?”

Steve scoffed. “Uh, yeah, that’s a no,” he replied. His weekends consisted of community service with Billy, homework, and the occasional hangout session with Dustin and his gang. The irony of feeling safest around a bunch of children was not lost on Steve in the slightest, but that didn’t change the warmth he felt watching the kids scream about wizards and dwarves a few nights a month.

“Then what is it with you?”

Steve stopped shuffling through boxes, wiped his dusty hands off on his pants, and turned around. “If you wanted me to go to the party tonight Billy, you just had to ask.”

He felt more than a little reckless at using Billy’s name for the first time.

“You wish, asshole,” Billy said, but he wasn’t looking at Steve now. His hands were fidgeting on his thighs like they usually did after he’d finished his last cigarette and knew that it’d be a few hours before the next one.

Steve waited him out.

“It’s just,” Billy began before giving in and pulling out his cigarettes, tapping the pack on his leg before drawing one out. “Do you seriously not give a fuck what people think about you?”

Steve laughed. “Not anymore. Not for a while.”

Billy leaned back against the wall and squinted at Steve through a haze of smoke. “How’d you get to be so fucking cool, then, Harrington?”

Steve paused, considering. “I guess I stopped giving a fuck when I started dating Nancy. Dating her made me realize that all my friends back then were tools and that I,” he did a quick salute, “was also a tool when I was with them. Once I figured that out, I cared less and

less about what people in this town thought about me, and more about what Nancy did. And now, no Nancy, so yeah, fuck it, I guess.”

Billy’s gaze was steady and fixed. “You talk big game, but I know you care what that nerd herd thinks of you. It’d break their little Lego hearts to hear you say you don’t give a shit about what they think.”

Steve laughed and reached out with his hand. Billy passed the cigarette wordlessly. “That’s true, that’s true. I do care what those brats think about me, but it’s different. They’re more like...the brothers and sisters I never had. I care about them like that.”

Billy lit up a new cigarette. “Precious.”

Steve studied Billy’s face, trying to figure out what to say next. Conversations with Billy swerved between open and funny to loaded and hostile in a matter of seconds—especially when he brought up Billy’s family.

“You’ve got Max.”

Billy exhaled sharply. The smoke drifted hazily up into the lights. “Not my sister. More like fellow prisoner of war.”

“What do you mean?”

Billy tossed his cigarette on the ground and crushed it with his boot. “I *mean* that you should come to Jacob’s party tonight and get fucked up with me, man. The king should mingle with the peasants every so often, y’know. Makes them feel important.”

Steve made a considering noise. He looked at his dusty pants, thought about his equally dusty hair, how his parents hadn’t questioned it even once since he’d started coming here. He thought about going home to an empty house and the taste of metal in his mouth as panic mounted.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “They need to be reminded of what they’re missing.”

The crowd at Jacob's parted like the Red Sea for Steve. He pretended not to notice the surprised glances and whispers. King Steve, he could practically hear Billy hiss into his ear. What a joke. The attention that he had once relished now made him want to turn back around, empty house and ghosts there be damned.

It only took him a few seconds to spot Billy. Billy was always impossible to miss.

He stood, wobbling slightly on a deck chair someone had placed in the living room, next to a table stacked high with kegs and scattered beer cans. A large group surrounded him, cheering as he shotgunned a beer with foam dripping down his chin.

As Billy crushed the empty can in his hand and tossed it to the floor, he spotted Steve. "Harrington!" he screamed. "You motherfucker!"

Everyone within earshot tensed, faces expectant. They might not know what happened in the tunnels under Hawkins last Fall, but they had heard about Billy Hargrove beating the shit out of Steve Harrington. Steve's face had been swollen and bruised for weeks. Steve never said who did it but everyone knew. The cuts on Billy's hands spoke for themselves.

Billy practically catapulted himself across the room. When he reached Steve he seemed to remember himself for a moment, wide grin faltering as he assumed his usual look of cocky condescension. "Didn't think you were gonna show."

Steve gestured around the house. "Yet here I stand."

Billy stared for a second, rubbing at his mouth absently with his thumb, before suddenly whirling around, cupping his hands to his mouth. "Hey!" he yelled to no one and to everyone. "Someone bring Steve Harrington a goddamn beer! Jesus!"

"I'd give you one of mine," he said, gesturing to a pile of empty cans, "but I think I drank 'em all."

Someone held a beer for Steve over his shoulder and he reached up to grab it. It had been a while, but Steve felt like no time had passed at

all as he held the cold glass bottle and tipped his head back to empty it.

Billy watched, grinning eagerly and openly now. When Steve dropped his beer to the ground with a satisfying clank, Billy grabbed his hand and raised it up, roaring in delight. Steve grinned sheepishly and raised his other hand in a fist as the party echoed Billy, screaming and whistling like Steve was a defending champion, not a guy who had just emptied a bottle of Miller Lite.

Steve remembered the rest of the night in fragments.

He remembered Billy's fingers grazing his as they sat on the front steps, passing a cigarette back and forth in between sips of watery beer.

He remembered standing next to Stacey Peterson who was in his English Lit class and talking about how it was so weird they hadn't talked to each other since 6th grade, and that they should definitely hang out more often. They spent a lot of time complimenting each other's hair.

He remembered dodging Tommy at the party like his life depended on it— that mistake of a friendship was one he never intended to repeat.

He remembered Billy, again, slinking up to him near the end of the night, crowding in close and whispering in his ear, "Y'know what you're like, Harrington? Do you know?"

Steve shook his head.

"Royalty. Royalty in exile."

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Steve asked, but Billy was already gone.

In the morning, Steve peeled himself off the floor and looked around, thanking god this wasn't his mess to clean up. Billy was nowhere to be seen.

Steve searched around for a bit before finding Jacob on the floor

between two twin beds in a guest room. Steve nudged him with his foot.

“Hey, did you see when Billy Hargrove left?” he asked. Jacob groaned and threw up a hand to block the weak sunlight pouring into the room.

“He left sometime last night I think. I don’t know. Can you pull down the blinds? It’s like the surface of the sun in here.”

Steve glanced at the barely present glimmers of sun but obliged him anyway and exited the room. He carefully stepped over the prone hungover bodies lying splayed across the floor and made his way back to his car parked a few houses over. Billy’s Camaro was nowhere to be seen.

Steve looked at the dashboard clock as he got in. Nearly 6:30. The sun had just begun to rise. Perfect timing. Looks like I’ve still got it, Steve thought to himself, amused but mostly self-loathing. He revved the Beemer’s engine and pulled it onto the road, eager to lay down on something that wasn’t sticky and carpeted— but not before he did a quick drive past Billy’s house. Just to make sure.

The fifth Saturday of community service found Steve huddled outside the back of the police station, arm wrapped around his middle and right hand cupped around a cigarette.

Hopper eyed it as he approached. “What was that you said about not smoking?” he asked.

Steve smiled ruefully. “Bad habits die hard?”

“Tell me about it,” Hopper said, laughing as he pulled out his own pack.

They stood outside the station and, except for the muted inhales and exhailes of their breathing, enjoyed the silence.

After a few minutes of this, Hopper tossed his cigarette butt into the outdoor ashtray and checked his watch. “Ready to head out?”

Steve looked over Hopper's shoulder, then back at Hopper. "What about Hargrove?"

Steve hadn't talked to Billy since the party. Steve had seen Billy's car parked haphazardly in front of his house the morning after, but besides that brief sign of life, nothing. No Billy in the hallways or parking lot. Steve hadn't seen the Camaro drop off Max at school all week, either, even though Dustin told him she'd been at school every day that week.

Hopper adjusted the walkie-talkie attached to his belt. "Told me he'd meet us there. Didn't say why."

The reason became clear as soon as Hopper and Steve pulled up the gravel driveway to the rec center.

A sedate tan-colored station wagon was parked in front and a figure stood by its hood, hands in jacket pockets, calmly watching the arrival of Hopper's police car.

The man offered his hand to Hopper as he approached. "Hi, Chief Hopper. I'm Neil Hargrove, Billy's dad." He turned to Steve. "You must be Steve Harrington. My daughter Max has told me nice things about you. Surprised to see you here." He did not offer Steve his hand.

Hopper was puzzled. "Nice to meet you Mr. Hargrove, but I'm a little confused— something happen to Billy's car?"

Without turning around, Mr. Hargrove called out. "Billy!"

There was a beat of silence and then the station wagon's passenger side door flew open. Billy stepped out and Steve had to keep himself from visibly recoiling.

Billy's right cheek and eye were a mottled patchwork of bruising and his bottom lip was slightly swollen. He didn't look at Steve at all as he approached.

Hopper stared. "Billy, what the hell happened?"

Billy didn't answer.

Mr. Hargrove placed a firm hand on Billy's shoulder. "My son got into a bit of a scuffle the other day and—"

"A bit of a scuffle?" Hopper interrupted, reaching forward to catch Billy by the chin, tilting his cheek to get a better angle. "Looks like somebody beat the shit out of him."

Mr. Hargrove's hand tightened. "I asked him who did this to him and he said he doesn't know. He probably got into it with one of those drunks that go to that dive bar off 65, but he doesn't want to tell me."

Billy stared at the ground.

"So," Mr. Hargrove continued, giving Billy's shoulder a small shake, "I told Billy that as long as he keeps lying to me, he's lost his car privileges. I never should have given him that ridiculous car."

"You didn't," Billy said, and his voice sounded scratchy and disused.

"What was that?" Mr. Hargrove said, and Steve doubted he was the only one who heard the false note of patience in his voice.

"Mom gave me that car," Billy replied, shrugging Mr. Hargrove's hand off his shoulder, "not you." He turned and entered the storage center without looking back.

Mr. Hargrove watched him go, jaw clenching and unclenching, before turning back to Hopper, all smiles.

"Teenagers," he said in mock exasperation.

Hopper eyed him warily. "I appreciate you taking the time out of your Saturday to bring him here, Mr. Hargrove."

"No problem, no problem at all. Punishment builds character. This is the most important thing he could be doing with his time—maybe it'll knock some sense into him. God knows I've tried," he said, laughing.

Steve felt like he was going to vomit. He headed into the storage center without a word.

Inside, Van Halen's "Jump" was blasting from a shitty radio that Steve had uncovered last weekend.

Billy, ubiquitous cigarette already perched on his swollen lips, was bobbing his head along with the music as he tossed broken golf clubs into a box.

"Didn't think that thing would actually work," Steve said weakly, gesturing to the radio.

Billy continued tossing the golf clubs, turning his back to Steve.

"Hey, man—can we talk about what just happened?"

Billy began whistling.

"Seriously, you're just going to ignore me?"

Billy continued whistling as if to say, you fucking bet.

Steve stood for a moment, indecision warring with a desire to discuss what he'd seen.

He turned and unplugged the radio. David Lee Roth's voice was cut off in mid-"Jump!"

For a terrible moment, Billy didn't move, shoulders tensed. Then he grabbed the full box of golf clubs and headed to the door. Steve blocked his path.

"Are we really not going to talk about it at all?"

Billy's eyes focused on a point somewhere over Steve's left shoulder. "What is there to talk about?" he asked, voice flat.

Steve gestured helplessly. "Your fucking face, Billy! What the fuck happened to your face?"

Billy turned his face sharply away so that the dim lights threw his bruises into shadow.

"What about my face?"

Steve reached forward to shift Billy's face back into the light—Billy, dropping the box of golf clubs, grabbed his wrist before it could make contact and squeezed. Hard. Steve gave out a low involuntary gasp of pain.

"What do you want me to tell you, Harrington?" Billy said between gritted teeth. "You want me to tell you who beat the shit out of me? Is that what you want?"

He suddenly pushed Steve back, his hand an iron brand around Steve's wrist, until they crashed into the wall, faces inches apart.

"You want me to tell you that my own dad—" his voice broke. "My own *father* did this shit to me?"

Steve's mouth was a grim slash of unhappiness. Billy's eyes were filled with barely held back tears.

He abruptly released Steve, backing as far away as he could before slumping down against a knot of old volleyball nets and boxes. He sat, knees up, head cradled in both hands. "Fuck you, Harrington. You don't get to ask me shit."

Steve stood, back still against the wall, wordless. "I—" he started, then stopped. What could he say?

He was saved from responding by the sudden presence of Hopper in the doorway.

He looked between Billy, huddled on the ground, and Steve, frozen against the wall. "I think that's enough for today, boys."

Hopper drove them back to the police station. Billy faced the window the entire time, eyes closed. Steve sat with his hands clasped in his lap, staring at them. No one spoke.

As they pulled into the station and parked, Hopper turned in his seat to face them. "Steve, go home. I'll see you next Saturday." He looked at Billy. "Billy, we're going to go have a chat in my office." When Billy's mouth opened to protest, Hopper cut him off. "Non-negotiable."

As Steve began to pull away in his car, he glanced back in his rearview. The last thing he saw before leaving was Billy squaring his shoulders, running his hand through his hair, and striding into the police station like he was actual Hawkins royalty.

3. chapter three

Notes for the Chapter:

im kind of flubbing the timeline of music/inventions that might exist in march of 85 (as in, this particular nintendo console came out that year but maybe wasnt available in march?) so please suspend all necessary disbelief. also i am so endeared by everyone's comments. thanks for joining me in this hell. next chapter SHOULD tie it all up, so i'll see you then!

As soon as Steve arrived to school on Monday, Billy was there. He had on sunglasses and a sloppily placed band-aid. He rapped on the window of Steve's car with his knuckles, tapping his foot impatiently as Steve rolled it down. "Come with me," was all he said before walking away.

Steve didn't bother with his backpack. He slipped his keys in his front jean pocket and followed. They ended up underneath the bleachers next to the football field. Steve waited for Billy to speak and watched as he paced. He wished Billy would take the sunglasses off.

Finally, Billy stopped. "You can't tell anybody," he said. "If you tell a fucking soul, tell that Wheeler chick or her freak boyfriend, I'll fucking kill you. *Anyone*, and you're dead."

Steve's shoulders sagged. "Jesus Christ, did you bring me here to threaten me? Why would I tell anybody?"

Billy shrugged. "You probably think you'd be doing me a favor, don't you? You think you gotta save poor Billy cause his dad wails on him. Well, you don't know shit."

"Why don't you tell me, then? Huh? Why don't you tell me what happened, Billy? Why don't you let me *try* to help you?"

Billy stared for a second and then pulled off his sunglasses. He sat down on the grass and pressed the bottoms of his palms into his eyes.

“How the fuck could you possibly understand?”

Steve knelt in front of him and reached out, slowly, slowly, and pulled Billy’s hands away from his face. They stayed like that a moment— Billy with his eyes pressed tightly against tears, and Steve holding Billy’s hands in his own. They were freezing.

“Hey,” Steve said, gently releasing Billy’s hands to brush Billy’s cheek with his fingertips. “How does your face look so much better? I just saw you two days ago and your cheek was so—” he stopped, remembering himself, “pretty bad,” he finished lamely, pulling his hand away.

Billy laughed softly and cracked his eyes open to fix Steve with an incredulous stare. “You’re such a rube, Harrington. It’s some of my step-mom’s concealer.”

“Oh,” Steve said, feeling stupid but also relieved he’d gotten Billy to crack a smile. He sat down next to Billy and leaned against one of the bleacher’s beams.

Steve checked his watch. “It’s a quarter after eight, maybe we should —”

“Steve,” Billy said, voice urgent. His eyes were wide, unblinking, and they bored into Steve’s. “You really can’t tell anybody,” he repeated.

A beat. Then—

“If that’s what you want,” Steve said, shrugging. “I’ll take it to my grave.”

Billy sniffed and straightened out his jacket. “That’s exactly where you’ll be if you breathe a goddamn word about this.”

Steve laughed, pleased to feel some of the equilibrium return to their conversation. “Always with the threats, Hargrove.”

“Promises, Harrington. They’re promises.”

They continued to sit for a while underneath the bleachers after that, sharing a cigarette, not speaking. Steve thought about how nice it

was to do this sober.

They didn't bring up Billy's face again.

They eventually decided they'd better go to at least one of their classes that day. While standing at his locker, Steve felt a small thwack against the back of his head. He turned around and saw Billy down the hall, pointing to the ground. Steve knelt and retrieved a crumpled ball of paper and turned it over in his hand, looking back at Billy questioningly.

"Read it, moron," Billy mouthed, and Steve rolled his eyes.

"How old is he," Steve muttered. He pulled the paper open and read, in surprisingly neat handwriting, "Pick me up at my place tonight at 10."

Steve frowned and looked back to where Billy had been standing, but he was already gone.

Steve sat outside the Hargrove household with his car's lights switched off and the engine running. It was a little after ten, and there was still no sign of Billy. Steve stared and willed him to appear.

After a few more minutes, lights flickered out in an upstairs bedroom and Steve saw a figure step out of a window onto the second level roof. Billy.

He went to the edge of the roof, lowered himself down, and then dropped. It was a good five feet fall at its lowest point, but Billy had clearly done this before.

Steve watched and couldn't help but grin as Billy sprinted across the lawn and threw himself into Steve's car. "Go, go, go!" Billy panted and Steve floored it. Billy turned in his seat and watched his house disappear through the car's back windshield.

"So where exactly are we headed?" Steve asked.

Billy had his legs propped up on the dashboard and his head lolled

against the back of the seat. He turned it towards Steve.

“Your parents home?”

Steve laughed. “Uh, pretty sure they’ve been gone since last Monday,” he said. “Dad had some big conference in Toronto and my mom wanted to get a new spring wardrobe up there or something.”

Billy threw his arm out and patted Steve’s shoulder. “Guess we’re going to Casa Harrington, then.” Steve nodded and signaled to change lanes. “And please god, tell me they don’t lock the liquor cabinet. I need to be drunk for this shit.”

Steve was only halfway scandalized. “Billy, it’s a *Monday*.”

Billy leered and Steve accelerated. “Anyway, I know where the key is.”

When they got to Steve’s house, Billy whistled. “Damn, Harrington. Your dad in the mob?”

“Ha ha,” Steve said. “It’s not that nice.” He opened the front door and led them into the foyer.

“Are you about to ask me to take my shoes off?” Billy said, grinning slyly.

Yes. “No.”

Billy laughed and took them off anyway. Steve followed suit and then walked behind Billy as he explored the house. Billy was quiet. He picked up a few pictures of Steve as a little kid and held them up to Steve, making faces. He ran his hand slowly over the keys of the piano they had in the corner of the living room. His fingers pressed down on random notes.

Eventually he stopped in front of the small bar area in the dining room. The top of it was littered with large containers of mixers and various glasses, while the cabinet underneath was pointedly locked.

“You got the key?” Billy asked, hopping up on the counter of the bar and swinging his legs.

Steve smirked and returned to the living room where he lifted up a small statue of St. Francis. He pulled off the taped key on its bottom and handed it wordlessly to Billy.

Billy hopped off the counter and pulled the liquor cabinet doors open with a quick twist of the key. He gave a low whistle of appreciation as he looked inside. He picked up a bottle to examine it. "This is top-shelf shit, Harrington."

Steve rubbed the back of his head, embarrassed. "They like to entertain," he said weakly.

Billy scoffed. "That much is very clear to me." He picked up another bottle, twisted its cap open and sniffed it. "This will *definitely* do." He handed the clear bottle to Steve and pulled another one onto the counter and left it there. Steve raised his eyebrows in question and Billy shrugged. "Backup."

They returned to the living room and sat facing each other on the couch. They didn't speak, just passed the bottle back and forth until, Steve guessed, Billy was ready to talk.

It only took half a bottle of vodka.

"You told me, earlier today," he finally said, taking a swig from the bottle.

"What'd I say?"

"You said," Billy continued, "that I should explain it to you. Tell you what happened. So that you could help. Right?"

Steve nodded. "Right."

"Well," and this time Billy took a *long* swig, "here goes nothing."

Steve took the bottle back from Billy and had his own long drink. He didn't think he'd want to be sober at all when he heard this. He gave the bottle back to Billy and waited.

Billy leaned back on the couch and fixed his eyes on the ceiling.

"It didn't—it wasn't—I. Okay. I didn't grow up with my dad. Neil. I didn't grow up with him."

He held out the bottle for Steve who grabbed it. "You grew up with your mom?"

Billy nodded and reached in his pocket for his pack of cigarettes. "You mind?" he asked, holding it up.

Steve didn't, but his parent's did. "No man, go ahead." His hands fidgeted with the cool glass bottle. Billy lit his cigarette and held his breath on the inhale, then slowly let it out.

"Anyways," he continued, "I grew up with my mom. Santa Monica, like I told you. Her and my dad basically had a one night stand in the sixties and then she had me. She had kinda known from around, but didn't realize what a prick he was until she got pregnant. He started demanding things all the time, telling her what to do, acting like he was her goddamn parent – I mean, she barely knew the guy." He held out his hand for the bottle and Steve obliged. Billy took a long pull and passed it back.

"Yeah so, my mom had me, and then pretty much forced my dad out of the picture. Now, my mom—" his head lolled towards Steve and he grinned. "My mom was fucking *cool*. That woman did not give a shit."

Steve couldn't help but smile back. "What was her name?"

Billy took a drag off his cigarette and closed his eyes for a long moment. "Sadie."

"That's a really pretty name."

"Yeah," Billy said. "It is." He suddenly jerked forward and stubbed out his cigarette on an unlucky copy of Ladies' Home Journal. "Anyway, she got sick a couple of years ago. Breast cancer just. Destroyed her." He gestured up and down his body. "It got everywhere. We found out two years ago in September and by November she was dead. Two months, man."

Steve opened his mouth to say something – he didn't know what, but

something—Billy waved him off.

“After she died, child services packed me up and dropped me off with Neil. He had just gotten married and got a new kid in the deal. I was not a part of that. I was not supposed to be involved. I was not... supposed to happen.”

He reached out for the bottle again and this time kept it once Steve handed it to him.

“My father is a military man, Harrington. A real *man’s man*. He likes things his way. You know that kid I scared the shit out of, Lucas Sinclair?” He didn’t wait for Steve to respond. “My dad kept telling me over and over again to keep Max away from him, how Max didn’t need to be around *those* kinds of people, how if I didn’t do my job as her older brother he’d fucking teach me how to do it himself.” He pounded his fist into the couch cushion. “He thinks he can control who we talk to, who we’re friends with.” He took another pull from the bottle. “Who we date.”

“And he can,” Billy said. He sounded defeated. “Because I’m scared of the prick, he can make me do whatever he wants.”

He gestured to his face. “This shit? Was for coming home late after Jacob’s party with a little extra thrown in for being drunk. Pissed him off real bad with that one. The mouth was for me wanting to drive myself to meet you and Hopper.”

Steve’s face must have betrayed his feelings. Billy’s eyes flashed. “Don’t fucking pity me,” he snarled. He held the bottle in his hand like an accusation. “Don’t. I can take a lot of shit from a lot of people, but I cannot take pity from you. Okay? Get it?”

Steve did not get it. He nodded and looked away. “Why don’t we tell Hopper?” he said softly. “Why don’t we get that asshole arrested and sent the fuck away?”

“You think I haven’t thought about that?” Billy said, sounding even more defeated. “Hopper tried to make me tell him last week but – I just can’t.” He placed the bottle onto the table and ran his hands through his hair. “The funny thing is, he’s a good dad to Max. Never

yells at her, never gets mad, never touches her. Not once. And Susan loves him. For whatever fucked up reason, she does. And she doesn't even work, man. What would Susan do if my dad went away? She's never had a real job in her life."

He looked down at his lap where his hands clutched each other tightly. "I'm the problem, Harrington. I'm the one who needs to go. My dad acts this way because I'm the way I am, and if I wasn't there —"

"Hey, hey," Steve interrupted. "No. Jesus Christ, Billy, *no*. Your dad doesn't beat the shit out of you because you... you deserve it or something. He does it because he's a sadistic asshole that likes hurting people. It has nothing to do with you. Billy. Billy, you're a good person." Billy started to shake his head. "You didn't wanna beat up Lucas, huh? You did it because you were scared. Just apologize. Admit to him that you were wrong. And anyway, I've already forgiven you for the shit you did to me and we're friends now, aren't we?"

Billy examined Steve's face. "Are we?"

Steve was embarrassed at his rush of words. Hearing Billy blame himself for his father hurting him like that made Steve feel crazy, like his skin was too tight and the only thing he could do to feel normal was go to the Hargrove's and visit Neil with his nailed-up baseball bat. The look on Billy's face was terrible.

"Of course we are," Steve said, placing his hand on Billy's shoulder. "You think I steal my parent's liquor for just anybody?"

Billy rolled his eyes. He moved his shoulder so Steve's hand fell away. "You wanna know why we even moved to Hawkins in the first place?" Steve nodded. "My dad beat me so fucking bad, I had to go to the hospital." He ran his hand across the lower part of his chest. "He broke three ribs and my right arm. He told the doctors at the hospital that I'd fallen down the stairs." He gave a small, bitter laugh. "Yeah, like the stairs would leave fingerprint shaped bruises.

"We moved after that cause the doctors at the hospital kept asking questions, and so did my teachers at school. They even sent the cops

to our house. They kept saying over and over that I could tell them the truth, that they couldn't do anything to stop my dad unless I said something. But I can't. I can't do it to Max, or Susan. I'm just gonna wait it out, and once I'm done with school I'm fucking *gone*."

Steve's mouth was a thin line as he stared at Billy.

Billy leaned back and stretched his arms over his head, then laid them on the back of the couch. "So how are you going to help me, Harrington? Now that you know, how's that gonna change *anything*?"

Steve felt like it changed everything. Billy's violence, Billy's anger, his bruises – it crystallized in his mind.

"What do you usually do after you and your dad get into a fight?" Steve asked slowly.

Billy shrugged. "Get in my car. Drive around. Sit down by the quarry and chain smoke."

"That all sounds *great*," Steve said, "but maybe you could just...come here instead?"

"Come here?" Billy repeated skeptically. "You barely know me, Harrington. You're not just going to let me stay in your nice house. What if I get dirt on the carpet?"

Steve gestured lazily over his shoulder. "We have a vacuum."

Billy stared at him. "You're serious."

Steve put a hand to his chest. "Serious as a heart attack, Hargrove."

Billy still looked disbelieving.

Steve leaned forward, intent. "This isn't—charity, or something. This is me giving a friend," and he let that word sink in for a moment, "a place to sleep when they need it. *If* you need it." Steve raised up his hands. "I'm only saying, the offer is on the table. Anytime."

Billy nodded and Steve was relieved he hadn't said no outright.

He reached forward and grabbed the vodka bottle. He walked over to the bar and placed it and the extra bottle back on their shelves.

He returned to the couch and grabbed the remote. "Want to watch some TV?"

Billy looked at him for a long moment and then snatched the remote out of his hand. "I'm choosing the channel."

Steve woke up as the remote Billy held in his hand clattered to the floor. He groaned and looked around for a clock. The shining neon letters on the VCR told him it was three in the morning.

Billy, Steve saw, was still fast asleep. Steve reached over and shook his shoulder gently. "Hey, Billy. Billy."

Billy screwed up his face in protest and batted Steve's hand away. "What the fuck do you want?" he mumbled.

"It's three o'clock in the morning," Steve said, running his hand over his face. He felt gross but mostly sober—Billy was the one responsible for the majority of the half empty Vodka bottle.

"So what?" Billy said, trying to turn away.

"Don't you need to go home?"

Billy grunted.

"Isn't your dad going to be mad?"

"Fuck him."

"Billy, seriously."

Billy looked up from where he'd pressed himself into the couch. He definitely, Steve decided, was still drunk. "It's 3 a.m.? That what you said?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah, and I need to take your drunk ass home."

"If it's three in the morning, I'm already dead," Billy said, flapping his hand in dismissal. "My dad probably figured out I was gone like four hours ago. Three AM?" he laughed into the couch cushion. "I'm soooo dead."

Steve was puzzled. "If you knew your dad was going to figure out you left, why even bother? Why didn't we just meet after school or something? Jesus, Billy. What the fuck?"

Billy leaned up on his elbows and his smile was twisted. "Listen. Listen. Harrington. Steve. My dad...is gonna kill me either way. I might as well get the shit beat out of me for a good reason for once." He fell back and eyed the ceiling. "Let me go back to sleep, okay?"

Steve stared, confounded. Billy's eyes fluttered closed and Steve shook him again. "Well," he said, "if you're going to stay here you're not going to sleep on a goddamn couch. Up, c'mon." He grabbed Billy by the hand and started yanking.

"Oh, Harrington, didn't know you liked it rough," Billy said, waggling his eyebrows and not helping at all.

Steve stopped pulling. "Seriously, get up. You can sleep in my room and I'll take the guest bedroom. C'mon."

He held out his hand and Billy smirked as he grabbed it and pulled himself up. "You want me to sleep in your bed? All you had to do was ask."

Steve sighed and pushed Billy in front of him. "Go, asshole."

Billy laughed and let himself be led upstairs, with Steve pushing behind him, taking one step at a time.

Nancy looked downright alarmed at Steve's locker the next morning. Before he could even open his mouth to say good morning she was leaning in and whispering.

"Why did Billy Hargrove come to school with you? In the same clothes he had on yesterday? Did you guys get *drunk* last night?"

Steve glanced up and down the hallway before drawing Nancy close to him. He leaned in and whispered, "Nance, as much as I would like to explain, I really, really cannot." He leaned back and shrugged.

She sighed exasperatedly. "Steve, I don't care if you got drunk last night and I don't care if you guys had some kind of macho sleepover. It's just so left field for you, y'know? I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. I know we don't talk as much anymore," she turned her gaze to the floor, "but that doesn't mean I don't still care about you, okay?"

Steve thought about the night before, how it was the first night since his parents had left that he hadn't woken up to the sound of his own screams.

He smiled and gave Nancy's shoulders a small shake. She looked back up at him. "Listen Wheeler, I'm perfectly fine. Okay? So stop worrying. Seriously. Billy and I are just...very...strange friends." He held her gaze and projected intense sincerity as she squinted suspiciously back at him.

She gave up with a sigh, wrinkling her nose and throwing her hands in the air. "Alright, alright, I'll leave you and whatever is happening with Billy Hargrove alone. If it's not a problem, then I guess it's none of my business." She looked kind of sad. "It's just really strange not to know what's going on all the time in your life now."

Steve's heart felt very full. "You just gotta ask, Nance." He pulled her in for a hug and they stood that way for a long moment.

When they pulled away, Nancy glanced at her watch. "Shit, I had an appointment with my counselor like, ten minutes ago." She looked back at Steve, clearly torn. "I really have to go, but you're coming to the Byers' this Saturday right?"

"I am contractually obligated to attend," Steve replied in mock solemnity. He was only halfway joking. Dustin *had* made him sign something when he became a part of "the party."

"Is this—a contract?" Steve had asked, staring in disbelief.

“It’s an *agreement*,” Dustin had corrected.

“For what possible reason would I need to sign a contract to hang out with a bunch of pre-teens?”

Mike had piped up from the floor of Dustin’s living room where he was playing with Dustin’s new Nintendo. “Technically, we’re teenagers now.”

Dustin had grinned proudly. “See?”

Steve shook his head. “Doesn’t make it any less weird.”

Dustin sighed and grabbed the paper out of Steve’s hands and pointed to the second paragraph. “See here, it just says you have to attend at least one party-related event a month to still be considered a member. Our game stuff is *technically* optional,” he frowned at Steve accusingly, “but the monthly dinner at the Byers is mandatory as shit.”

Steve had eventually given in and signed, to Dustin’s very vocal delight, and this Saturday he was being called to fulfill his sacred oath—monthly dinner at the Byers’.

At the end of the day, Steve found Billy standing by his car. He was checking his reflection in the driver’s side mirror. Steve thought it probably had less to do with vanity than it did with checking his bruises. He turned as he heard Steve approach.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” Steve said as he tossed his backpack into his car’s backseat.

Billy smirked. “Yeah, people are gonna start wondering what a good looking guy like me is doing next to a preppy piece of shit like this.” He slapped the hood of the car with his palm and grinned.

“Oh well, if it’s such a preppy piece of shit, I guess you don’t need a ride home in it—which is why, I assume, you’re lurking outside my car?”

Billy pulled on his sunglasses. "Got it in one, Harrington. You're getting smarter every day."

Steve got in the car. "Not smart enough to tell you to fuck off, though."

Billy went around the front of the car and got in the passenger's side. "You'll learn."

4. chapter four

Notes for the Chapter:

"Finally, in a low whisper, he said, 'I think I might be a terrible person.' For a split second I believed him - I thought he was about to confess a crime, maybe a murder. Then I realized that we all think we might be terrible people. But we only reveal this before asking someone to love us. It is a kind of undressing."

MIRANDA JULY, THE FIRST BAD MAN

Tuesday passed uneventfully. Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday followed. Every day that Steve pulled into the school parking lot was another day that he expected to see Billy's face punctuated by new shades of blue, green, and purple.

Instead, Billy's face was healing. The swelling on his mouth had gone away almost immediately, and by that Friday, Billy's face looked nearly healed. The only sign of what his father did to him that remained was a pale plum colored bruise that lingered around his eye.

That Friday morning, Steve examined it in the school parking lot, frowning. He prodded it with a finger and Billy shoved his hand away.

"Fuck, Harrington, have some common sense. It still hurts," Billy said, massaging the spot angrily.

Steve was remorseless. "It looks awful."

Billy raised an eyebrow. "Compared to what? An entire half of my face looked like this like five days ago."

"That looked bad, too."

Billy smirked. "Harrington, Harrington, you're way too concerned with my face."

"It's because it's so hideous," Steve dead-panned.

Billy's leaned back against his car and his smile grew. "We both know that's a damn lie."

Steve's gaze lingered for a moment before he scoffed, hitched up his backpack and turned away. "Yeah, yeah, you're hot shit."

Billy slammed the driver's door of his Camaro shut and followed. "Damn fucking straight."

"This shit," Billy said, kicking a box over, "is never ending."

Steve shrugged, his mouth full of sandwich. He looked around the room critically. "It's not that bad."

Billy didn't bother to respond. He pulled a dusty storage crate off of a shelf, emptied it onto the ground, and made a makeshift seat. Steve held out Billy's sandwich wordlessly which Billy accepted with a small smile. Their hands touched, and Billy pulled away slowly.

They ate in companionable silence, a complete one-eighty from the weekend before. The unplugged radio sat abandoned on the floor from where they'd left it and it was clear from their workload that they were a week behind. Steve didn't mind at all. This shift in Billy was strange and fascinating and Steve wanted to follow it to whatever end.

He gazed at Billy under his lashes and considered him. From the moment that Billy had grabbed him and thrown him against the wall, so close that Steve could see the vein in Billy's neck throbbing, so close that he could have reached out and traced it with his fingertips—from that moment, something had irrevocably changed. Changed in small, almost unnoticeable ways, but changed all the same.

Billy didn't seem to want to hurt Steve anymore. And Steve didn't think that hurt had ever been personal. Rather, Billy was like wildfire. When he was in pain, he struck out and anything he happened to touch was fair game for annihilation.

"Your face," Steve said, gesturing to his own. "It really does look a lot better."

Billy rolled his eyes. "For now." He took a bite from his sandwich.

Steve waited for him to finish chewing before he asked, "What do you mean 'for now'?"

Billy took a pull of coke and—Steve wouldn't call it a smile. More like a baring of teeth. "My dad likes to...wait. Doesn't pile it on too much. He doesn't ever want to take me to the hospital again, cause they ask too many questions. We all know how that worked out last time, and Neil Hargrove doesn't make the same mistake twice."

Steve was no longer hungry. He put his sandwich on the ground and clasped his hands, trying to match Billy's nonchalant tone. "So, like, you think your dad's just waiting for you to be all healed up to... punish you for staying at my house on Monday?"

"Got it in one," Billy said around a mouthful of sandwich. He swallowed and held out his glass coke bottle like he was giving a toast. "I'd say I've got a good three or four days before I get what's coming to me."

Steve couldn't even attempt to feign Billy's indifference this time. "Well, why don't you just stay at my house for the next couple of nights then?"

Billy's eyes widened for an infinitesimal moment before shuttering. "Harrington, you looking for an excuse to get me over to your house? You just had to ask."

Normally, Billy's weird flirting would fluster Steve and send him retreating. Right now, it merely frustrated him.

"Billy. Seriously. You can stay at my house, whenever you need to. I'm offering."

Billy's slick grin fell away and his eyes narrowed. "What fucking good would it do to stay for a few days?" he sneered. "He'd still be there when I got back. You think he's just going to forget?" Billy laughed, but there was no mirth in it. His eyes looked hollow. "Thanks for the offer, but no thanks." He squared his shoulders. "I'll be fine. Always have been, always will be. There's nothing that fucker can do to me

now that he hasn't done before." He pulled out a cigarette and lit it with a wild snap of his lighter. He took out another, pressed the tips of the two together, and handed the second one to Steve who took it numbly.

"Thanks," he mumbled. Hearing Billy talk about the inevitability of his father's violence made him feel impotent and violent and scared, all at once. It was like that moment down in the tunnels under Hawkins when he'd been sure, so sure, that he and Dustin were about to die—that sense of helplessness and rage that it had to end like this. His right hand suddenly ached to have his bat in it. He wanted to swing and swing and swing until he destroyed something completely. Is this, he wondered, what Billy felt like all the time?

They sat in silence as they smoked. Billy, looking distinctly untroubled (a practiced look, Steve realized), leaned back against the wall, legs spread.

Steve sat hunched over his cigarette, worrying at it with his fingers in between drags.

"You got some dinner with the freaks tonight you got to go to?" Billy asked suddenly, eyeing his cigarette in his hand as he spoke. Billy's air of practiced carelessness was becoming more and more blatant to Steve. The rigid set of Billy's shoulders and the force of his gaze on the cigarette gave him away.

Steve smiled and laughed around an exhale of smoke. "Yeah," he said, stubbing the cigarette out. "It's our monthly dinner. Part of my *actual* contractual obligation to remain friends with them. I had to sign something. Pretty sure it's not legally binding, but they insisted."

Billy gazed at him, considering his words. "You been friends with the geek squad a long time?"

Steve shook his head. He felt they were about to tread on dangerous territory. Demodog, dead Barb, national conspiracy, world-ending shit territory.

"Since when?"

Steve shrugged. "I don't really remember," he said vaguely. "Sometime last year, I guess."

"You guess," Billy repeated.

Steve swigged the last bit of his coke and shrugged again.

Billy's expression was strange. He looked half-amused, half... something else. "For all the shit you know about me," he said, gesturing at himself, "I don't know anything about you, Harrington." He threw the butt of his cigarette to the ground and crushed it under his boot.

Steve opened his mouth to protest but Billy held up his hand. "Don't fucking lie to me," he said, and his voice wasn't angry. Just thoughtful. "I'm just stating the facts. I'll get the truth out of you one day." He stood up, stretched, and then offered Steve a hand up from his position on the floor. He yanked Steve up hard, and their chests collided for a moment through the momentum. Billy held onto his hand for a brief moment and squeezed it hard before stepping away. "I can be *very* persuasive."

Steve stood on the Byer's doorstep. In one hand he held a pie balanced underneath a rotisserie chicken, and in the other a bag of chips which he clutched tightly as he knocked on the front door.

Joyce Byers opened it with a wide smile and ushered him inside. It was always nice to come over and not see it covered in some nightmare inducing scribbles or an entire home goods' store worth of Christmas lights. He placed his food on the table and Mrs. Byers eyed his purchases appreciatively.

"Apple pie from Stalworth's? You spoil me," she said, and hugged him.

Steve almost didn't understand how to respond to such intense, uninhibited warmth. His mother and father's affection was perfunctory at best, and completely absent at worst. He allowed himself to linger in Mrs. Byers' kindness for a moment longer before

pulling away. He gestured at the food he'd brought and ran a hand through his hair awkwardly. "I didn't really know what we'd need so I brought the three important food groups: pie, chicken, and chips."

Mrs. Byers nodded knowingly. "Exactly what we needed, Steve. Thank you."

His reply was interrupted by a cry from a back bedroom. "Is that Steve? Mrs. Byers, is Steve here? Tell him to get his ass back here, stat!"

Mrs. Byers gestured to the back of her house, grinning helplessly. "You've been summoned." Steve grimaced jokingly and Mrs. Byers shooed him away.

The scene in Will's bedroom was chaotic. Nancy and Jonathan stood in the doorway of the bedroom looking perplexed. There was wrapping paper strewn across the floor and Dustin had tape all over his hair. It looked like, at one point, they had attempted to wrap Mike. He had bits of paper hanging off of his back and a harassed look on his face. Lucas sat along the opposite wall of the bedroom, scissors in hand and a long strip of tape dangling off of his shoulder. Will sat in the center of the room, strangely tape and wrapping paper free. He held a small wrapped box in his hand, and he shifted to hide it, grinning, when Steve entered the room.

Dustin didn't notice Steve enter. "Tonight is super important, guys, so we gotta make sure—"

"Uh, Dustin," Lucas said, cutting his eyes across the room to where Steve was standing.

"It took us like eight hours to even wrap the thing," Dustin continued obliviously.

"Dustin," Will said more urgently, pointing to the doorway. Dustin shook his head, and started counting off important points on his fingers. "First, we have to—"

"Dustin!" Mike said in exasperation. "Steve is *here*!"

Dustin's mouth snapped shut and he whirled to face the doorway.

“Well, why didn’t anyone tell me?” he said, turning back to Mike, Will, and Lucas.

Lucas threw his hands up in disgust, shaking his head.

Steve stood there, bemused. He eyed the wrapping paper and tape in Dustin’s hair. “Was there some kind of wrapping paper explosion in here, guys?”

Lucas, Mike, Will, and Dustin, all eyed each other meaningfully.

“Give it to him,” Mike said lowly and pushed at Will’s shoulder.

“*You* give it to him!” Will whispered back, pushing the small box into Mike’s reluctant hands.

Mike, as if in the world’s most important game of hot potato, immediately tossed the box into Lucas’ hands who just shook his head and tossed it to Dustin. “It was your idea!” he hissed. Dustin clutched the box while he opened his mouth to refuse, but then he looked at the other boys whose gazes were fixed on him determinedly and he closed it again. He looked up at Steve and held out the box.

Steve took it, puzzled. “Are we getting engaged?” he joked, turning it over in his hand.

None of the kids even cracked a smile. From the corner of his eye, he could see Nancy and Jonathan leaning on each other, doubled over in silent laughter.

“Wait,” Mike said suddenly, “shouldn’t we wait for Max and El to get here?”

Dustin huffed. “Well it’s too late now, he’s already got it. Just open it, Steve.”

Steve looked askance at the little package in his hand. “You guys know my birthday was like, months ago right?”

Dustin made an irritated hurry up gesture with his hand. “Open the box, Harrington!”

"Sheesh, okay, okay," Steve said, and pulled off the wrapping paper. Underneath the paper was a small white box, the kind you would find a pair of earrings in or other small jewelry. Steve really hoped there wasn't some kind of necklace in here that they expected him to wear. He pulled the lid off the box.

Inside sat a small figurine, about an inch tall. Steve pulled it out and held it up to the light. The room was silent as he looked it over.

"Is this...me?" he asked, voice filled with an emotion he couldn't name. The little figurine had clearly been altered, almost clumsily. What had originally been a figure carrying a sword thrust out with one arm had been transformed into a facsimile of Steve. The character's clothes had been painted to resemble jeans and the light green jacket he favored during the fall. The sword had been transformed into a bat with little painted toothpick nails protruding from it. The figurine's hair had been painted brown, and its little feet had been painted to resemble tennis shoes.

It was very clearly a badly painted over figurine transformed a little bit with some cheap clay and toothpicks.

It was horrible. It was the best thing Steve had ever gotten.

Dustin spoke first. "Yeah. Well. Um. We got the idea that...since you're a member of the party for like, three months now—"

"Four months," Will corrected.

"Four months, whatever," Dustin continued, "that you'd like. Um. Maybe. For when we play DND together sometimes, now you can have your own figure. We've all kind of got out our own already, so we thought...you'd like your own." His voice faded out as Steve didn't respond and continued to stare at the little figurine. "Will's the one who made it," Dustin said, pointing, half-accusatory, half-panicked.

Steve looked at Will, who had turned a bright shade of pink, and then at the other kids. He fought really hard to keep his voice level. "This is the coolest thing anyone has ever given me. I love it. Thank you."

Dustin's smile blazed. "Really? You like it? I knew you would!" He leaned over to Lucas and punched him on the shoulder. "I knew he would!"

"Yeah, yeah," Lucas said, rubbing the spot on his shoulder, but he too was grinning brightly.

"How did you get," Steve's hand fluttered to his own hair, "the hair—to look like that?"

Will, no longer blushing, reached up and took the figurine out of Steve's hand. "Well, first," he began, and continued to explain the exact process in great detail up until the point when there was another knock on the door.

Lucas sprang up. "That's Max," he said, and sprinted towards the door.

Nancy peeled away from Jonathan. "I'll go see if she needs help bringing anything in," she said.

Steve, by this point, was only halfway listening to Will as he explained his apparently very involved process. Instead, he took the figurine back out of Will's hand and lay on his back, holding his figurine to the light, examining it from every angle. He wondered, is this how they see me? Like some kind of hero? Steve didn't ever feel very heroic. He mostly felt afraid these days.

He leaned up on his elbows, tucking the figurine into his closed fist, as he heard heavy footsteps come towards the bedroom. Nancy entered first. She looked like she had just done something Steve wouldn't like, but that she found very amusing. Steve knew that look. It never ended up well for him.

Moments after her arrival, he understood her expression.

"Jesus, Harrington, this is what you do for fun?" Billy kneeled and looked down at Steve's pastel sweater he had worn for the occasion. "Nice sweater."

Steve, remembering at the last moment his very delicate figurine still clutched in his fist, only made a strangled noise in his throat before

standing up. “Nancy? A word? In the hallway? Now?” He grabbed the little white box his figurine had come in, placed it back inside, and handed it to Will for safekeeping.

Billy stood back up and began examining some of Will’s drawings on the walls. “We’ll only be a moment,” Steve said, practically shoving Nancy into the hallway.

He dragged her down the hall into the bathroom and closed the door roughly behind him. “What the hell, Nance?” he said, throwing his hands up, knowing how crazy he looked and hating that he couldn’t help it.

Nancy shrugged, bit her lip to repress a smile, and crossed her arms over her chest. “I invited him to dinner!” she said. “What’s so bad about that?”

“It’s just—He. I! He can’t...see me like this Nancy!” He ran his hands through his hair, looking for the right words to explain the amount of bad world-mixing that was happening at that very moment.

“Were you trying to keep it a secret that you’re into pastels?” Nancy said, fingering the edge of his sweater.

He whacked her hand away distractedly. “No, it’s...weird. It’s just weird that he’s here.” Even Steve couldn’t understand why he was freaking out so badly. It was one thing to be alone with Billy in a storage room, or on his couch in the dark. It was another thing to be here with Billy and other people, and to have to reconcile the Steve who sat in the dark, sipping vodka and listening to Billy spill his guts, with the Steve who almost cried over a figurine, enjoyed cashmere sweaters, and bought pies just because he’d heard Joyce Byers mention that she loved them once.

He didn’t know how his feelings about Billy, the strange push and pull of his emotions, would fit in when he was surrounded by the most important people to him in the world. Mostly he was terrified something would go wrong.

“What did you even say to him to get him to come inside?” Steve asked suspiciously.

Nancy gave an exaggerated wink. “You’ll have to ask him,” she said.

Steve ran his hands through his hair again and groaned. “If this turns into a disaster, I’m holding you personally responsible Nancy Wheeler.”

Nancy held up three fingers in a Girl Scout salute. “Scout’s honor, it’ll be okay.”

“That’s what you say now,” Steve replied darkly, before straightening up, listening hard. “Hey— isn’t it kind of quiet in Will’s room?”

Nancy tilted her head, listening. “I don’t hear anything.”

Steve rolled up the sleeves of his sweater nervously. “You don’t think Billy’s murdered them and is like, harvesting their organs now or something do you?”

Nancy checked her watch. “Not this early in the evening, surely.”

Steve threw his hands up in disgust. “Personally responsible, Nancy!”

She held open the bathroom door for him. “After you.”

Steve rushed out and headed to Will’s bedroom. It was empty. He went to the kitchen next. Mrs. Byers was carefully reading the heating instructions Dustin’s mom had written out for a massive pan of lasagna. She looked up distractedly when Steve entered. “I think they’re in the basement,” she told Steve, understanding his expression immediately. He smiled gratefully and headed down there.

The second he opened the door he heard screaming.

“You’re wrong, you’re so fucking wrong it’s ridiculous.”

“And why’s that?” Billy drawled.

“There’s no way they’re *both* the Thing!” Dustin replied, frustrated. “Wouldn’t they know? The ending just doesn’t make any sense if they’re both infected.”

“Still,” Billy continued, smiling lazily and twirling an unlit cigarette

in his hand, “that’s why it’s my opinion.”

“Well your opinion is dirt,” Dustin replied huffily.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” Steve said, stepping into the room and looking between Dustin and Billy questioningly.

“This asshole,” Dustin said disgustedly, gesturing to Billy who shrugged and grinned, “thinks that at the end of *The Thing*, both MacReady *and* Childs are infected which is just – just—completely ridiculous!” He was practically screaming towards the end.

Max and Lucas sat on the basement floor playing Mike’s Super Mario game that he’d brought over. Will and Mike were looking at a crate of Jonathan’s old records, pulling them out one by one to examine the covers and flip them over to read the track listing. Dustin was the only one who seemed to be disturbed by Billy’s dubious film opinion.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Steve said. “*The Thing*?”

“It’s a movie by the dude who did *Halloween*,” Max said from the floor without taking her eyes off the screen. Her Mario had just swallowed a star and was destroying turtles like it was going out of style.

“John Carpenter,” Mike said, still eyeing Jonathan’s records. “It’s got Kurt Russell in it.”

“He’s MacReady,” Dustin supplied.

“Okay,” Steve said. “How is it that everyone in here knows about this movie but me?”

“I saw it at the theater,” Billy said, smirking. He tucked his cigarette behind his ear.

“We saw it on video,” Dustin and Will said together. Dustin pointed to a poster on the basement wall. It was bright blue and had a man with light shining out of his face, and it said “*The Thing*” in a creepy font. The poster added nothing to Steve’s understanding of what exactly the film was about.

"Anyways, your *friend*," Dustin continued, eyeing Billy suspiciously, "clearly didn't really watch the movie when he saw it, because there's no way MacReady and Childs are both—"

"Listen, kid, my opinion is my opinion, you're not gonna change my mind."

Dustin groaned in frustration. "But you're just so *wrong*!"

"Hey," Steve said, stepping between the two and making a time out gesture with his hands. "Let's pump the brakes on this conversation for a bit. Hargrove, may I speak to you..." but Billy was already moving over to the Mike and Will's record pile. He nudged it with his foot.

"What is this shit?"

Will looked up, seemingly undisturbed at having his brother's record collection being referred to as shit. "Jonathan's records."

Billy kneeled and picked one up. It was Iggy and the Stooges "Raw Power."

"Huh," he said, turning it over. "Looks like your brother has decent taste." He picked up another album, the Carpenters' "Now & Then." He made a face, but put it gently back into the pile without comment. He began rifling through the albums with Will and Mike, commenting on the ones they pulled out with one of three reactions: "Hm," "Total shit," or "Pretty decent."

Steve watched, struggling to accept this new reality where Billy Hargrove talked about movies with Dustin, and looked at records with Mike and Will. Did Steve step into an alternate dimension when he came through the front door? Was Billy being *nice*?

"Hey kids," Mrs. Byers called from the stairs. "Hopper's here with El! Time for dinner!"

Mike nearly levitated off the floor and up the stairs, while Max and Lucas carefully saved their Super Mario game and followed. Will stacked the records he had gone through up neatly on the floor and dragged Dustin with him upstairs, pulling him harder every time he

tried to turn and gesture back to Steve and Billy, who remained downstairs facing each other.

“They’re weird as shit,” Billy said, pulling his cigarette from behind his ear back into his hand. He tugged at it restlessly, but didn’t light it.

“Yeah,” Steve said, unable to hide his defensive tone.

Billy held up his hands. “Not saying it’s bad. Just stating a fact.”

Steve bit his lip and snatched the cigarette out of Billy’s hand. He put it in his jean pocket. Billy looked a bit lost without something to fidget with. “Why did you come here? To make fun of me?”

Billy’s mouth twisted for a brief moment before he grinned, wide and mean. “Make fun of you? Harrington, I’m starting to understand why you hang out around the little freak shows now. They’re entertaining as shit.”

Steve felt uncertain and unbalanced. He didn’t know what Billy wanted. Did Billy even want things? Did Billy want things from *Steve*?

Steve sighed. “Forget it. Let’s just go upstairs and eat.”

As he turned, two things happened at once. Billy, muttering under his breath, reached out and grabbed his hand. Steve, not completely understanding what was happening, froze in place.

“I came in,” Billy started, and Steve almost couldn’t place the emotion on his face. It was, he suddenly realized, sincerity. “I came in...because, god, I can’t believe—”

“Steve!” Dustin yelled down. “Come on! I’m literally starving to death up here, man! Hurry your ass up!”

Steve heard the low rumble of what he assumed to be Hopper’s voice in response before Dustin called out again, “Sorry I said ass! Hurry up, though!”

Billy’s eyes darted upstairs, and then back to Steve, and then to their clasped hands. He pulled away slowly. “Nancy told me what you

were wearing,” he said, looking everywhere but at Steve’s face, “and I couldn’t believe it, so I had to see it for myself.” He finally brought his eyes to Steve’s. “Truly embarrassing, Harrington.”

Steve looked at Billy for a long moment. “Is that really what you were going to say?”

Billy looked down, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a new cigarette to tuck behind his ear. “Yep,” he said, and just like that, any vulnerability was a distant memory, something unspoken, like bottles of vodka tucked into cabinets and Steve still finding strands of Billy’s hair in his sheets.

Steve headed upstairs without another word.

Dinner was a strange affair. There were only two seats left at the table; one for him and one next to him for Billy since, he guessed, everyone assumed they were friends at this point and would want to sit together.

Hopper made a brief introduction of El to Billy. “This is El, my daughter. She’s adopted. No more questions.”

Billy raised his eyebrows, but did as he was told. He gave El a small wave and she waved back. She kept looking between Billy and Steve throughout the meal, and then would whisper into Mike’s ear. Mike kept shaking his head and whispering, much more loudly than El was, “No, no, no, not possible. You know you shouldn’t listen in, El. It’s rude, come on.”

She finally stopped whispering to Mike altogether and just sat staring at Billy, who was growing increasingly uncomfortable.

“Why does this chick keep staring at me like I murdered her mom?” he asked Steve under his breath.

Steve, who was determinedly chewing away at both lasagna and rotisserie chicken and doing his best to ignore Billy’s existence, just shrugged and rasped out, “Beats me,” between bites.

Dinner went on without incident. Nancy, who sat on Steve's other side, harassed him about his English grades (decent) and asked which schools he'd heard back from (zero, because he hadn't applied—but Nancy didn't need to know that yet). She listed off schools she was thinking about applying to, and Steve listened, feeling both proud and sad all at the same time. Nancy knew what she wanted from life, and she went after it. Steve hadn't felt like that in a long time.

Mrs. Byers and Hopper told everyone a story about the time they'd set off the school fire alarms because they'd been smoking in the teacher's bathroom. "They never did figure out it was us," Hopper said, wiping tears out laughter out of his eyes.

"Who knew you used to be such a rebel, Mom," Jonathan said admiringly.

"Oh yeah," Hopper agreed, nodding. "A real force of nature." He leaned in conspiratorially. "I used to have the biggest crush on her when we were kids. Didn't know how to tell her. I would just steal her cigarettes and ignore her. Somehow that didn't work."

Mrs. Byers burst out laughing. "Hopper, you did not!"

He nodded his head, "Hand to the bible truth, Joyce."

Dustin screwed up his face in confusion. "Why would you be mean to her to make her like you?"

Hopper held out his hands and shrugged. "All I have to say in my defense is that I was stupid and I was a teenage boy, which is like, stupid squared."

The table erupted in conversation after that, with El still staring at Billy, and Jonathan explaining to the rapt audience of Will and Dustin the best ways to get the girl you like to notice you. Steve stifled a laugh. It was the blind leading the blind.

Mrs. Byers and Hopper were still reminiscing over high school, Max and Lucas were discussing gaming strategies (under Max's tutelage, Lucas now had the second-highest Dig Dug score), and Nancy was listening to Jonathan's explanation, along with Will and Dustin, with

a small, secret smile on her face.

Mike, nudging a plate of Eggos over to El in a bid to finally win her attention, managed to break her stare with the siren call of toasted waffles.

Billy leaned over and whispered into Steve's ear, "I'm gonna go take a leak."

Steve nodded around his slice of apple pie. "Didn't need to know that, but okay."

The second Billy disappeared from sight, Steve turned to Nancy. "Nance," he said, "I honestly want to know what you said to him that got him to come tonight."

Nancy stared at him for a moment, her eyes wide and sympathetic. She leaned in to whisper in his ear, and Steve couldn't help but notice how different it felt from when Billy did it. "I didn't ask him to come. He's the one who asked if he could." She pulled back and shrugged. "I thought I'd give him a chance."

Steve was, if it was even possible, even more confused now than he had been. Billy had *wanted* to come to this party? Why? For what possible reason?

Nancy, sensing his distress, shook his shoulder gently. "Hey, let's help Mrs. Byers and clean up some of this mess, okay?" Nancy, gently but firmly, then sent Hoper and Mrs. Byers off to the living room to relax.

Steve, grateful for the distraction, nodded and started picking up empty plates.

The moment that the cleaning started, Mike, El, and all the other kids disappeared downstairs, leaving Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve to do all the dirty work.

"If I didn't think they'd break more plates than clean them, I'd drag them back up here myself," Nancy said, sighing and wringing a dish rag in her hands as Steve scraped food off plates and handed them to her to rinse. Jonathan stood by to dry, a serious expression on his face as he set each clean plate down gently.

They did this for a few minutes before Steve realized Billy hadn't returned from the bathroom.

"Do you think he drowned?" Steve asked Nancy.

"I bet he's downstairs talking to the kids," Jonathan said thoughtfully, while Nancy laughed.

Steve, not wanting to leave children he cared about alone with Billy for more time than was necessary, looked at Nancy pleadingly. "Go on," she said, "I think Jonathan and I can handle the rest."

Steve tried not to run down the stairs, but he did do a very non-suspicious jog.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Billy was nowhere to be seen. Neither were Lucas and Max.

Dustin and Will were playing the Super Mario game while El and Mike watched. "Hey," Steve said, proud of how normal his voice sounded, "where'd Lucas and Max go?"

"Curfew," Dustin said, twisting his body as he played the game, as if that could encourage his little Mario figure to run faster. "Billy said they had to go home and Lucas went outside with them to say bye to Max."

"Cool, cool, cool," Steve said, edging towards the basement door. He wanted to say goodbye to Billy, to see his face one last time before this night was over, now knowing what he did, but he also wanted to make sure Lucas hadn't been murdered.

When Steve made it onto the lawn, Billy was long gone. Lucas remained, staring out onto the road leading away from the Byers' house.

"Hey Lucas," Steve said. Lucas jumped when he felt Steve's hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, hey man," Lucas said, shaking himself a little.

"What's up, why are you just standing out here like that?" Steve

asked, looking him over for any visible wounds. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," Lucas said slowly. "I'm just kind of in shock."

"Shock? Why?" Steve asked, peering closely at his face through the dim lights of the house behind them.

"Billy Hargrove just...*apologized* to me," he said in disbelief. "Like, pulled me aside after Max got in the car and said he was sorry for what an asshole he'd been. I thought he was going to, I don't know, tell me to fuck off but he just...said sorry. What the fuck." He looked up at Steve, who stared back.

"What the fuck," Steve repeated.

He stood silently next to Lucas in the yard, gazing down the road towards where Billy lived. He imagined that he saw the glowing pinpricks of Camaro taillights, roaring away.

They went back into the house after a while. Lucas moved as if he was in a daze, and Steve wasn't much better off. What would he do with this new information about Billy? Billy, who was constantly revealing new and surprising parts of himself to Steve. Billy, who still never let himself be figured out or understood.

He made his excuses to Dustin and the other kids and, glad he hadn't forgotten, held out his hand to Will. Will wordlessly handed him back his figurine and Steve clutched it like a precious thing. "Thank you for this," he said, and he meant more than the figurine. The kids had saved him as much as he'd saved them.

"No problem," Will said. His eyes were wide and knowing, and Steve suddenly remembered how much more Will had suffered, in more frightening ways, than any 13-year-old should ever have to. He'd seen things. He understood. This is why Steve allowed himself to lean on the kids, because they'd been through hell with him and come out all the brighter. He needed that for himself, and he was slowly getting there. Nights like tonight helped.

He headed upstairs to say goodbye to everyone else. Hopper and Mrs.

Byers were still in the living room, this time with wine glasses in hand, and Nancy and Jonathan were finishing up the dishes.

"I think I'm gonna head out," he said to Nancy, tilting his thumb towards the front door. "You guys can keep the rest of the pie or whatever. I definitely don't need to eat for like, another three months after that meal."

"I feel you," Hopper said from the couch, patting his stomach.

"Thanks for having me over again Mrs. Byers," Steve said.

"Always a pleasure to see you, Steve."

Nancy tossed her dishtowel into the sink and grabbed her coat from off her chair at the dinner table. "I'll walk you to your car."

Steve waved once more to Jonathan, Hopper, and Mrs. Byers, and let the door close behind him and Nancy.

"Did I make a mistake tonight?" she asked, and Steve was surprised to see her looking so upset. "With Billy, I mean. Should I not have let him come in?"

"No," Steve said slowly. "It actually worked out...surprisingly well."

"No bloodshed?" Nancy asked, lifting her eyebrows and smiling in mock shock.

Steve nodded in agreement, laughing. "Somehow we were all spared."

"But seriously," she said, reaching out and grabbing Steve by his arm. "I told you that I worry about you. I kind of, um, let him in for myself, I guess you could say?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," she looked at the ground for a moment and then back up at Steve. "I just wanted to make sure that you guys were, I don't know, actually friends, and that he wasn't like, blackmailing you or something."

Steve's smile grew slowly across his face in disbelief. "Blackmail, Nancy?"

"Shut up!" she said, grinning at the ridiculousness of her own words. "It's just, all the sudden you guys were connected at the hip, and I didn't understand why. So I wanted to see what he was like around you for myself. And he *did* ask."

Steve nodded thoughtfully. "He did ask." What that meant, Steve still didn't know.

"You know what's weird about Billy," Nancy said, shoving her hands into her coat pockets and looking up at the stars.

Steve could think of hundreds of weird things about Billy. "What?" he asked.

"The guy is actually *smart*," she said, like she was revealing a dark secret.

"Smart?" Steve asked, confused. "Smart how?"

"Smart like, he's in all advanced classes smart. Advanced English, Calculus, Advanced World History, everything. I saw his folder on my advisor's desk the other day when I went in to talk about next year."

Wait. "Wait, wait, wait," Steve said. "Calculus?"

"I know, I couldn't believe it either. He really cultivates that dumb asshole aesthetic, doesn't he? But honestly, I'm sure the schools in California are a thousand times better than here so it's not really that surprising—"

"Billy told me he was in Trig," he said, looking at Nancy in confusion. "I let him look at my math notes."

Nancy shrugged. "That's not what his transcript says, Steve."

"But—why would he...?" He waved his hand in dismissal. "Y'know what, I'm not going to think about that now. I've learned enough weird shit about Billy tonight to just. Not think about it for a while. I'm going to go home, get drunk, and go to sleep. Okay?"

Nancy nodded, her eyes wide with concern.

Steve rolled his eyes and smiled. "Not too drunk, Nancy, c'mon."

"Okay, okay. Have a good night, Steve." She pulled him in for a hug and released him gently. "Take care of yourself."

"Always do," he said, and he gave a small salute as he climbed back into his car, doing everything he could to not think about the strangeness of Billy Hargrove.

It was two in the morning, Steve Harrington was drunk, his parents weren't home, and someone was banging on the front door.

He jerked awake at the sound of the first knock, wiped the drool off of his chin, and glared blearily at the VCR. Two in the morning. Too fucking late.

"I'm coming," Steve whispered, getting his feet steady underneath him. He saw his shirt abandoned on the floor next to the couch (when had that happened?) but ignored it as he wobbled towards the door. Whoever was there could deal with Steve being shirtless, or they could go. It sounded very assertive in Steve's mind.

The pounding didn't let up. "I'm coming," Steve said, louder this time. "I'm coming," he repeated for good measure, clutching at the wall for support as the room swayed around him. "Fuuuuck," he whispered under his breath. "Get it together, Harrington." He shook his head and slapped his cheeks quickly before reaching for the door handle. He was prepared to do his best impression of sober until he saw who was on the other side of the door.

"Billy? Oh my god, your face, Billy, your face."

Billy smiled and had blood on his teeth. "Guess I didn't have those three days after all."

Billy shoved his way inside the house and locked the door behind him. Steve stumbled back over to the wall to turn on the overhead lights, but Billy held out a hand to stop him. "Don't," he said in an

unsteady voice.

Billy lowered himself on the couch and tilted his head back. He took in deep, wet sounding breaths.

Steve made his way to the couch and looked at Billy questioningly as his hand hovered over a small lamp. Billy waved his hand in agreement and Steve turned it on.

"I'm gonna kill him," Steve said. "I'm gonna find my fuckin' bat, and I'm gonna kill him."

He lurched off the couch and started to head upstairs. "Where are you going?" Billy called. "Come back to the couch, Steve."

"My bat is...upstairs," Steve said, "and I've gotta get it if I'm gonna kill your fucking dad."

"Harrington, come back to the couch," Billy said. "You're not going to kill my father. If anyone's killing that asshole, it's me. Come on, I would chase you but I'm kind of in a lot of pain so just, come back here. Please."

Steve paused in front of the staircase. It was the please that turned him around.

He returned to where Billy sat, hand pressed hard into his side.

"Are you drunk?" Billy asked, peering at him closely.

"Where are you bleeding?" Steve asked at almost the same time.

"You first," Billy said, smiling.

Steve frowned. "Yes I'm drunk, you asshole. Now is not the time for joking."

"What's it time for, then?" Billy asked, wincing as he shifted on the couch.

"It's time for...I don't know, skull crushing."

“Skull crushing,” Billy repeated flatly.

“Yeah, like, me crushing your dad’s skull. With my bat. That is upstairs.” Steve started to get up again, but Billy pulled him back down.

“Well, that answers my question, Harrington. Jesus.”

“Fuck you, *Hargrove*, you’re the one covered in blood, here!”

“Don’t exaggerate, it’s not that much.”

“It looks like a lot to me,” Steve said quietly. “Hey, let me get you a rag or something, okay? And I’m pretty sure my mom keeps bandages and stuff in the bathroom, too. Hold on.”

“Okay,” Billy said, hissing when Steve accidentally nudged his side as he got up. “No bats,” he called to Steve’s retreating back.

“No bats,” Steve replied in agreement. “For now,” he said, under his breath.

He ran a couple of hand towels under hot water and pulled the first-aid kit out from its place in the linen closet.

He knelt next to Billy, and held up the towel helplessly as he surveyed Billy’s face. His lip was already swelling, and his right eye, the only that just yesterday had nearly healed, was nearly swollen shut. Blood was all over his face. “Where is the blood even coming from?” he asked, unsure of where to even begin.

“If there’s a lot of blood, it’s probably from my scalp. Head wounds bleed a lot.”

Steve allowed himself to pretend that Billy’s knowledge was clinical instead of personal.

Steve began gently sliding the towel across Billy’s face, moving extra carefully around his eye. He maneuvered so that he was hovering over Billy, with his knees on either side of Billy’s legs on the sofa. He leaned in closely and examined the blood in Billy’s hair.

"Looks like it was your scalp," he said. "How did he even get you there?" Steve prodded at the spot gently with his towel.

Billy winced. "Made a mistake. Forgot to take his rings off before he got started. Hasn't done that in a while, actually."

Steve nodded and left that spot alone. He finished clearing the rest of the blood off of Billy's face and touched it softly. He moved it from side to side, catching it in all angles of the light, to make sure he'd gotten all the blood.

"Where else did he hurt you?" Steve asked.

Billy turned his face away. "There's nothing else that's bleeding, Harrington."

"Still," Steve said. "C'mon, take your shirt off so I can see."

"That's unnecessary," Billy started saying, right as Steve leaned down and began lifting his shirt off. Billy, sensing his inevitable defeat, just held his arms up and Steve eased the shirt off of him the rest of the way.

Steve pulled the lamp closer to them so that it threw Billy's chest into the light. Steve inhaled sharply.

"A lot of these...look old," he said, and looked up at Billy's shuttered face. He reached out to touch Billy's ribs and Billy grabbed his hand.

"They're not broken. Just swollen."

Steve nodded and backed off the couch and headed towards the fridge. "I'll get you some ice," he said.

"Lots of ice."

Steve wrapped a handful onto a rag and hurried back over to Billy. "Where should I—?"

Billy grabbed his hand. "Here." He pulled Steve's hand with the ice onto his ribs, about five inches underneath his heart.

They sat there like that for some time. Steve was caught between the V of Billy's legs as he leaned forward to hold the ice against Billy's chest. Billy sat with his head leaned back and eyes closed, but Steve knew he was still awake. He could feel the heat from Billy's chest radiate against his own, and the only sound was their breathing and the ice cracking against itself as it shifted in Steve's hand.

"What set him off?" Steve asked, voice hushed.

Billy's lip curled up and his eyes cracked open. "We came home too late, I mouthed off, I'm a queer little fuck up, take your pick."

Steve rocked back on his heels. "Your dad calls you that?"

Billy peered at Steve. His eyes flicked over Steve's face, and chest, then back again. He took the ice-filled towel out of Steve's hand and held it against his own chest.

"He has his reasons," he said slowly.

Steve shook his head. "There's no reason that—"

"Have you ever wondered," Billy said, and his eyes were so bright, "why my dad beat the shit out of me so bad we had to leave California? Have you ever wondered what set him off?"

Steve swallowed hard. "No, because there's nothing you could do that would deserve—"

Billy cut him off again. He shifted on the sofa and Steve became acutely aware of how close their bodies were.

"Max caught me sucking off my friend in my bedroom," he said plainly, like he was relaying the weather. Steve stiffened. "Max told her mom, her mom told my dad, my dad put me in the hospital. Now I'm in Hawkins fucking Indiana." He glanced down at his lap and then back at Steve's face. His eyes burned. "You wanna get off my lap now, Harrington?"

Yes, Steve thought. No, he thought after that.

"Are you...gay?" Steve asked. His mind was racing.

“Jesus Christ,” Billy said, and his jaw clenched. “This isn’t a fucking afterschool special, man. Yeah, I like cock, so get the fuck off me.”

Steve stayed where he was. “Why did you come here?”

Billy looked surprised. “You invited me here.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you had to actually come,” Steve said.

Billy frowned and he moved the ice off of his chest. “Get off of me, now. Or I’ll make you.”

“Why did you come here, Billy?”

Billy’s jaw ticked and he looked away. “What do you want me to say, Harrington?”

Steve wrapped his hand around Billy’s jaw, softly, so softly, and pulled him back to face Steve.

“Why did you come here?” Steve asked again.

“Get off of me, please,” Billy said, so softly that Steve had to strain to hear him.

“Why did you come here?” Steve leaned in as he asked, and his lips ghosted against Billy’s ear.

“I wanted to see you,” Billy finally said, like it was ripped out of his chest, like it was the most sinful sort of confession. “You fucking asshole, I wanted to see you.”

Steve moved his face into Billy’s, bumping their noses together. The alcohol made him brave.

“I thought so,” he said, and pressed his lips gently into Billy’s.

Billy made a low keening noise in the back of his throat and pressed his hands against Steve’s chest, pushing him back.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asked, panting. His eyes darted across Steve’s face, and Steve had never seen him look more

frightened.

“Am I not making it clear enough?” Steve said, leaning in for another kiss, only to be pushed away by Billy again.

“Seriously, Harrington. Steve. If you’re drunk or, or if you don’t mean this, I can’t—”

Steve grabbed Billy’s hands on his chest and intertwined their fingers. “Shut up and let me kiss you, asshole.”

Billy’s hands fell away, and instead of pushing Steve away again, he wrapped his hands around Steve’s shoulders and pulled him in tightly.

“Is this—are you okay?” Steve asked in between kisses. “Your mouth —”

Billy smiled against his lips. “If I’m in pain, believe me, you’ll be the first to know.”

Steve smiled back and ran his tongue against the seam of Billy’s lips. He was fully seated in Billy’s lap, and their chests were hot and tight against each other. Billy slid his hands off of Steve’s shoulders and into Steve’s hair, pulling at it lightly. Steve’s hips stuttered forward at that, so Billy did it again, harder this time. Steve moaned and leaned back, baring his throat. Billy, moving his hands through Steve’s hair, moved forward and licked it delicately, then roughly, biting and soothing along the right side of Steve’s neck as Steve writhed in his lap.

“Wanted to do this for so long,” Billy whispered, lips brushing wildly against Steve’s chest and neck and lips as he spoke. “Since the first time I saw you I wanted this.”

Steve bucked forward again and moaned as Billy ran his hands down his chest, scratching lightly at Steve’s nipples. Steve felt like Billy was everywhere—touching his face, his chest, his thighs, and for a brief moment, the shadow of a hand thumbed the buckle on his belt before it was gone again.

Billy moved back to Steve’s mouth and his lips softened, opened

wide, and Steve had the strangest simultaneous feeling, like Billy was drinking him in and at the same time he was drowning. He felt dizzy, like he was being pulled under. He tried to be gentle, to keep from hurting Billy's already busted open lip, but Billy kept pulling him in harder and harder and Steve couldn't help but follow. Billy's hands were like brands around his shoulders, and they moved from his waist to his neck to his hair, and back again as Billy kissed him senseless. It wasn't until Steve tasted blood in his mouth that he realized they should stop.

He put his hands up to Billy's face and pulled him away slowly, breathing hard. He rested his forehead against Billy's and reveled in their mixing breaths.

"Billy, you're bleeding," he said, and it took a long moment for Billy to respond, to focus on his face again, to let his dilated pupils move from Steve's lips back to his eyes, to make sense of what Steve just said.

Billy touched his lip gently, and it came back slick with blood.

He laughed and let his head slip forward to rest against Steve's chest.

"I'm drunk and you're bleeding," Steve sighed, smiling and running his hands gently through the back of Billy's hair. "C'mon, up." He stood and stretched out his hand to Billy.

Billy winced, clutched his side for a moment, and then stood on unsteady legs.

"Go to my room, I'll be up there in a second," Steve said. "I'll get you some more ice."

Billy stared uncertainly. "Your room?"

"Yeah. To *sleep*," Steve said, pushing Billy away gently. "Go."

Billy cocked his jaw, looked at the floor and then back up at Steve. His eyes were shining. "You're a man of constant surprises, Harrington."

Steve shrugged as he pulled more ice out of the fridge. "I'm a man of

hidden depths.”

Billy didn't respond. He just stood there and watched and Steve pulled out a new dish towel and wrapped the ice carefully inside of it.

Steve glanced up at Billy and smiled. “Thought I told you to go upstairs, man.”

Billy didn't look away. “I like watching you,” he said. Steve swallowed, hard. He turned and pulled a glass from the cabinet, filled it with water, and gulped it down.

Billy was still there when he turned back around.

“You like watching me, huh?” Steve said, mostly because he didn't know what else to say. This was a brave new world. He nearly killed you like five months ago, Steve thought to himself with a tinge of hysteria. He was surprised to realize that he didn't really give a fuck. That Billy, unstoppable, full of hate, had slowly transformed to the Billy in front of him. This strange new Billy, who did things like apologize, who (Steve now saw) tried to make friends with Steve's friends, who wedged himself into all the cracks of Steve's life in any way that he could. This Billy that was standing in front of him with bruised ribs, a busted lip, and blood in his hair, all because he'd given in to spending a few more hours with Steve.

Billy didn't look away. Steve knew he wouldn't, couldn't, because he didn't think that it was in Billy's genetic makeup to be a coward. Billy could be afraid, yes, but a coward? Never. Steve placed his glass in the sink and headed towards Billy. He grabbed his hand gently and nodded towards the stairs. “Let's go to bed.”

Billy squeezed his hand back and nodded. “You don't know how long I've been waiting to hear you say that.”

Steve let out a surprised laugh. “God, Hargrove, you fucking cheeseball. I didn't know you had it in you.”

Billy suddenly pulled Steve close, and Steve was reminded about how *strong* Billy was. “You love it,” he said, leaning in close.

Billy allowed himself to be pushed him away as Steve scoffed, glad that the low lights in the room didn't give away his blush. "Maybe I do," he allowed, and then pulled Billy upstairs to finally get some sleep.

When Steve woke up the next morning, Billy was already awake and looking at him.

Steve reached out and brushed the new bruises that had blossomed across Billy's face overnight. Billy closed his eyes and sighed.

The black eye looked worse in the dim early morning light and the right side of Billy's face was once again painted shades of purple, green, and yellow.

Steve pulled back the blankets to assess the damage to Billy's chest. Billy rolled onto his back and flopped his arms to his sides, allowing Steve full access.

Steve bit his lip and gently traced along the edges of old bruises, nearly faded, and new ones, vivid and stark in contrast to Billy's pale skin. "Are you in a lot of pain?" Steve asked, brow furrowed in concern.

Billy sat up on his elbows and it looked like he was about to reach out, but then thought better of it. "I've had worse."

Steve sat up on his knees and reached for Billy's hand that had made the aborted gesture. "I didn't ask if you'd had worse, I asked if you were in pain."

Billy looked down at their clasped hands and then back at Steve with a question in his eyes. "How drunk were you last night?"

Steve didn't look away. "Not as drunk as I bet you thought I was." He leaned in close to Billy's ear. "You *like* me."

Billy stared for a moment before scowling. "You're okay."

Steve's smile grew. "There are no takebacks, Hargrove. You like me,"

he said, almost singsong-y towards the end.

Billy scrutinized Steve's face closely and then swung himself off the bed as quickly as someone with bruised ribs could. "Listen," he said, and his voice sounded hoarse and urgent. "This," he gestured between them, "isn't a joke. It's not something you can...tell your friends about. I can't," he looked at the ceiling, and then back at Steve, "meet your parents. I can't be your *prom date*. We can't...hold hands. Do you get it?"

Steve sat in silence. Did he get it? He knew that, whatever relationship he had with Billy, it wouldn't be anything like what he'd had with Nancy. That relationship had been good and wonderful, it had made Steve very happy, but it had also been safe. Billy was the direct opposite of safe.

Steve was so goddamn tired of being safe.

He held out his hand. "I get it," he said. "No promises. Let's just be together now, okay?"

Billy hesitated for a long moment before accepting Steve's hand. Steve drew him back onto the bed and pulled the covers over their heads.

They lay like that for a long time, just looking at each other and breathing. Steve eventually reached out and traced Billy's bottom lip with his thumb as Billy's eyes fluttered shut.

"You could stay here," Steve said into the silence, his hand working its way across Billy's face and into his hair. "For as long as you wanted to, you could stay here."

Billy's eyes opened and he gazed at Steve, expressionless.

"We're done with school in like, a month. Three weeks. What are you doing after that?"

Billy's mouth twitched. "After that? I'm fucking gone."

Steve felt his heart plummet, oh so slightly, but ignored it, packed that feeling away to examine later.

“So until then, *stay*.”

Billy’s lips ticked up in a small smile. “It’s that easy for you, huh?”

Steve’s hand traveled upwards to the wound on Billy’s scalp. He was careful to avoid it, but he ran his hands around it as soothingly as he could. “If it’s a decision between you staying here with me or going home to that asshole, then yeah. It’s very easy.”

Billy pulled Steve’s hand away from his hair and onto his chest where he clasped it with both hands. “Your parents?”

Steve smiled wryly. “Never home, and there’s always the guest bedroom if they are.”

Billy’s eyes searched Steve’s face. “Looks like you’ve got this all figured out.”

“Billy, even if what happened last night hadn’t happened,” he ignored the flush spreading across his cheeks, “I’d still want you to stay here.”

Billy lifted Steve’s hand up to his lips and kissed it once, twice, three times. “Yeah, about that.”

Steve’s breath began to stutter in his chest.

“If I stay here, guess that stuff is probably gonna happen more often.”

Steve brought his other hand down to run across Billy’s chest. “Probably,” he agreed.

Billy pulled one of Steve’s fingers into his mouth and closed around it slowly, his eyes fixed on Steve’s face all the while. “You got a problem with that?”

Steve watched the thrust of his hand inside Billy’s mouth and his tongue went dry. “Can’t think of a single one.”

Billy released Steve’s finger with a wet pop. “Didn’t think so.”

They spent the rest of Sunday in bed.

Steve luxuriated in the way that Billy alternated between treating him like a precious thing to be held and a vast landscape to be conquered. However, Steve felt frustrated by his lack of access to Billy's body in turn. He could only lay on his side and touch Billy so slowly, so reverently, that it made Billy close his eyes and turn away.

"Stop," he said harshly after a few minutes of this, "I'm not a fucking girl. You don't have to seduce me or some shit to get in my pants. You're already there."

"First of all," Steve said, twisting Billy's nipples and appreciating the immediate gasp of pleasure. "I didn't notice you weren't a girl, so thanks for pointing that out." He leaned forward and let his teeth scratch along the line of Billy's jaw, ending with a deep pointed kiss on Billy's mouth. "Second of all, don't fucking tell me what to do." He moved his hand down from Billy's chest to the button of the jeans Billy had slept in. "I think this'll shut you up."

Billy's hand snapped down and grabbed Steve's like an iron band. Steve glanced up questioningly and saw that Billy was shaking his head no, with an almost panicked look in his eye.

He watched as Billy's mouth twisted up into a smile and he nodded down at Steve's crotch. "Let's take care of that first, shall we?"

Billy reached down to unbutton Steve's pants with his free hand and Steve couldn't find it in himself to stop or question him. His breath caught in his throat as he panted. "It's rude not to treat the guest first, though," he said, eyes widening as Billy tugged down his pants and underwear in one expert pull.

"Don't worry, Harrington, I won't tell your parents about your lack of manners," Billy said, grin sharp like a knife, and then his hand was on Steve's cock.

Steve, who'd only had himself for company for the past few months, thrust into his hand immediately, head tipping back and mouth falling open in silent pleasure.

"If only you could see yourself," Billy said, whispering in his ear as he worked Steve over, rolling his hand across the tip of Steve's cock and moving back up and down, slowly and steadily. "See how fucked out you look right now."

Steve's eyes opened and he smiled, which quickly turned into a gasp as Billy twisted his hand *just so*. "Wait till it's your turn," he sighed. "I'm gonna wreck you."

Billy nodded condescendingly and ran his thumb over the come pooling down Steve's cock. "Big words from someone who's never held a dick other than his own before, Harrington." His hand began to speed up.

"What can I say," Steve said between breaths, "I'm a quick learner."

Billy nodded. "We'll see," and then he worked Steve so hard that his toes began to curl. Billy leaned over and all Steve saw was Billy's hand on his cock, his necklace resting warm against his chest, and the mottled bruises that were everywhere, everywhere. Billy's hot breath hit his ear and as he whispered, "Come," Steve felt completely undone.

Afterwards, Steve and Billy managed to crawl out of the bed long enough to take a shower and for Steve to change the sheets.

"We're just gonna get them dirty again," Billy said, rolling his eyes, but Steve shrugged. "I like to be clean."

They spent the rest of the afternoon alternating between sleeping and kissing, with it never getting quite as heated as it had that morning. Billy would work Steve up to a point, and then bring him back down. Every time Steve reached to undo Billy's pants, Billy found some way to distract him—usually involving his tongue. Steve would look at Billy questioningly, but Billy would just smirk and say, "Later," and Steve would get caught up in whatever new thing Billy was doing to his body.

At the end of the day, both of them had pulled on shirts and found themselves in the kitchen scavenging for dinner. Billy sat on the counter and swung his legs as Steve read the back of a frozen pizza

box, screwing his face up in concentration. He watched Steve with a strange expression on his face, which he consciously changed as he called Steve over to him. Steve glanced up, laid down the frozen pizza and made his way into the V of Billy's hanging legs.

"You're taller than me right now," he said, leaning up to kiss into Billy's smile. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

Billy pushed at Steve's shoulder and scowled. "You're about one inch taller than me, asshole."

"Still," Steve said, pulling him back in for a kiss, "an inch is an inch."

They separated from the kiss and Billy held Steve close, pressing their foreheads together as they just breathed. He jerked himself back after a long moment as if remembering himself, and pointed to the pizza.

"Hurry it up Harrington, you wanna starve me to death or something?"

"Or something," Steve said with an exaggerated wink to which Billy could only make a fake vomiting noise.

After dinner, they sat on the couch. They started out with a good foot of space between them, but slowly through the television episodes and commercials, they came back together, with Steve slinging his arm over Billy's shoulders and their ankles tucked together on the floor.

After about three hours of mindless television, which Steve could only claim to have been paying attention to for one of, he pulled the remote slowly out of Billy's hand and shut it off.

He detangled their ankles and pulled his arm off Billy's shoulder in order to face him.

"What's happening tomorrow?" he asked, looking Billy straight in the eye.

"What do you mean?" Billy said, but Steve knew he was only stalling. He knew exactly what Steve meant.

"I mean...does anything change tomorrow?"

Billy shrugged. "It doesn't have to." His hands began to fidget.

"What if I wanted it to?" Steve asked.

Billy exhaled loudly and gave in to his unspoken desire, pulling out his perpetual pack of cigarettes and placing one in his mouth. He tilted the pack towards Steve but Steve shook his head no, waiting on Billy's answer.

Billy lit the cigarette and inhaled, letting the smoke sit in his lungs, and then exhaled through his nose and mouth. He tilted his head back and eyed Steve apprehensively. "What would that involve, exactly?"

"What do you mean?"

"These *changes*," Billy said, gesturing in the air with his cigarette, smoke trailing after his words. "You'd carry my books to class or something?"

"Well, no—"

"You gonna give me your class ring? Your letterman jacket?"

"Jesus, Billy, I'm trying to be serious here."

Billy slammed his fist down on the table and his voice trembled with anger. "So the fuck am I, Harrington. Believe me when I tell you that we can't let things change. We have to act normal, okay? One word," he lifted up a finger, "one fucking word about you and me, about this, gets to my old man and he murders us both. Get it?" Steve didn't answer. "Do you get it?"

Steve nodded.

"Say you get it."

Steve swallowed and looked anywhere but at Billy's eyes. "I get it."

There was a moment of absolute stillness before Billy groaned and

stubbed out his cigarette. "Hey, Jesus Christ, c'mere, I'm sorry." Steve allowed himself to be dragged into Billy's embrace. "He makes me crazy, Harrington. He makes me fucking crazy. I'm so afraid all the time and I couldn't take it if something happened to you because of me."

Steve's arms crawled around Billy's shoulders and he pulled him in tighter. "I understand," he whispered into Billy's hair, rocking him slightly in his arms. "I won't let him do anything to you anymore either, okay?"

Billy huffed out a laugh and Steve pulled them apart enough that he could see Billy's face. "We'll be normal at school tomorrow. Go to school in our separate cars, say hi to each other in the hallway, and then go our merry separate ways. But after school, you're coming back here, okay?"

Billy nodded.

"Do you think Max could bring you a bag of your clothes or something?"

Billy nodded again. "Everything I've got could fit into one suitcase," he said like it was a point of pride, and Steve didn't allow himself to visibly react to that. Just another reason to hate Neil Hargrove.

"Will she be okay tomorrow with getting to school and stuff?" Steve asked.

"Susan will know she's gotta take her to school for the next couple of days," Billy said. "I usually run off for a while after my dad wails on me, so she'll expect it. What they won't expect is that I'm never going back to that hell hole. After graduation," he looked at the floor, then back at Steve, "I'm gone."

"One month," Steve said solemnly.

"One month," Billy agreed.

Steve stretched out his hand and caught the back of Billy's head, bringing it near his as he closed their lips together. "So let's make it count."

The next week passed by like something from another person's life. Steve couldn't help but compare it to when he had been dating Nancy—with the big, obvious difference being that he and Billy were *not* dating.

At school, Billy and Steve were normal. They didn't go out of their way to see each other, like Steve had with Nancy, or talk for longer than necessary if they did happen across each other in the hallways.

After school, however, was an entirely different story. They couldn't keep their hands off of each other.

Steve's parents had made a brief appearance on Tuesday, staying just long enough to restock the refrigerator before they headed off to France? Florida? Fiji? It was something with a F. If they were surprised to see their son had someone staying in the guest bedroom, they didn't show it. Steve's mother simply ran her hands through his hair and tutted about needing to buy him clothes for the summer. His father grunted out a hello and spent the rest of his time at home holed away in his office. The only sign that he was even there was the smoke from his cigars wafting out of the office.

Billy charmed Steve's mother instantly (naturally), whereas Steve's dad didn't give him a second glance. Steve and Billy essentially told her the truth about why Billy was staying there, without going into the gritty details. She had had sniffed back tears and patted Steve's cheek, then Billy's, wondering how she'd raised such a good boy.

And then they were gone again and it was just Billy and Steve.

Max kept them updated on Neil.

"Honestly, I can't even tell if he notices you're gone," Max said, shrugging as her fingers flew over the arcade game's joysticks.

Billy leaned against the side of the machine and raised his eyebrows at Steve while he slurped down a coke. Steve stood with his hands on his hips and a frustrated expression.

"He hasn't said anything?" Steve asked again in disbelief.

“Nada,” Max replied, punctuating her words with a particularly vicious jab of the controllers.

“Is he acting,” Steve glanced at Billy, “normal?”

Max rolled her eyes at Billy and looked back at Steve. “Define normal. My step-dad is the anti-Christ.”

Steve shrugged. “It’s been almost a week. I’m a nervous guy, I guess.”

Billy turned from the side of the game to face it. “Cut the dude’s head off,” he said dispassionately.

“What,” Max asked between clenched teeth as she moved the joysticks furiously, “do you think I’m trying to do.”

“Try harder,” Billy replied, thumping her on the back of the head.

Max flicked him off in response and Billy just laughed.

She finally finished off the game (second highest score, and she was working her way to the top) and turned around. Billy wordlessly held out a handful of quarters which she accepted and shoved into her pocket.

“Anything else you want me to bring you from the house?”

Billy took his lighter out and began flipping it in the air and catching it. “Thanks, but no thanks squirt. Just wanted to see if my dad had revealed any of his nefarious plots to you.”

Over Max’s shoulder, Steve mouthed, “Nefarious plots?” Billy ignored him.

Max shrugged and turned back to the game. “Lucas and the other boys are going to be here soon, if you don’t want to get trapped.”

Steve, as much as he loved those kids, did not want to be dragged into a conversation about magic, or video games, or whatever the hell it was that they talked about all the time.

He barely had to look at Billy’s face to know he agreed. “Yeah, I think we’re going to go,” Steve said, already heading for the door.

“Tell the dipshits I said hey, alright?”

Max nodded, already enraptured by the character selection screen of her game. “Hey Billy,” she called out, eyes still on the screen, “take care of yourself okay?”

Billy stared back at Max, mouth slightly agape. Kind words were a rarity in the Hargrove family, especially between Billy and Max—but they were getting better.

Steve, glancing from Max to Billy, took pity on him. “He will,” he replied, and dragged Billy out of the arcade by his shirt.

They took separate cars back to Steve’s house.

As soon as the front door shut behind them, Billy was on Steve.

“What should we have for dinner?” Steve said as Billy crowded him against the wall. Billy nipped at his throat and smiled. “I think you know what I’m hungry for.”

“Ugh,” Steve said, laughing, “seriously repulsive, Hargrove.”

He ducked under Billy’s arm and backed away with his hands up, fending Billy off. “Really, what should we eat?”

Billy stalked after him, already lifting off his shirt. “You know I don’t want food, asshole.”

Steve was laughing in earnest now. “No, no, no, Billy, you wild animal, fuck off, we need to *eat*.”

Billy waggled his eyebrows and began to unzip his pants. “I’ve got something for you to eat.”

Steve doubled over in laughter. “You are so gross, god—”

There was a knock on the door. Billy froze.

“Are you expecting someone?” he asked, already zipping up his pants and reaching for his discarded shirt.

“No,” Steve said slowly. “And my parents shouldn’t be back for another week.” He walked slowly to the door. “Who is it?” he called out.

“Santa Claus,” said a voice that sounded distinctly Hopper-like, and Steve sighed in relief. “You decent, Billy?” he called out quietly behind him.

“Hardly ever,” Billy replied, but he had his shirt and pants on, so Steve counted it as a victory.

He pulled the front door open to see a very harassed looking Hopper.

“Hargrove here too?” he asked, and Steve nodded. “Good.” Steve moved out of the doorway and gestured for Hopper to come in.

Hopper sat on one end of the couch, Steve on the other, and Billy in an adjacent chair. They stared at Hopper expectantly, who sat there with his head down, rubbing his temples and sighing.

“So let me get this straight,” he said slowly. “You,” he pointed at Billy, “are staying here.” Billy nodded. “For reasons that you will not express to me, that I therefore legally cannot act upon.” Billy nodded again.

Hopper leaned up and spread out his hands. “You’re eighteen, there’s nothing your dad can do to you to make you come home.” Billy glanced at Steve and then back at Hopper. “You still going to school?”

Billy scoffed. “Unfortunately.”

Hopper frowned. “If I’d had your grades in high school, I would have been a little bit happier about going.”

Billy did not look at Steve.

“You apply anywhere?”

Billy did not look at Steve.

“Uh. A couple places, yeah.”

Hopper smiled and twisted his hat around in his hand. "That's what I like to hear. Kid like you doesn't need to get stuck in a small town like Hawkins. Where are you thinking? Chicago? Back to California?"

Billy did not look at Steve.

"Something like that."

Hopper turned to Steve. "How about you?"

Steve's eyes were reluctant to leave Billy's face but he looked at Hopper all the same. "Schools? Um, yeah, loads of places."

Hopper nodded and smiled again, pleased. His hand tightened around his hat. "Well, I didn't come here just to bother you guys about school. I came to," he cleared his throat, "make sure both of you know you can come to me. About anything or...anyone."

Steve didn't know what to say. Billy didn't say anything either. Hopper looked between them, nodded to himself, and stood up. "Well, that's all I came here to tell you. See you tomorrow, bright and early."

Steve followed him to the door. As he opened it, realization struck and he paused. "Hopper, how did you know Billy was here?"

Hopper pulled his hat back on and tapped Steve's forehead. "How do you think?" he said, and smiled before heading back to his truck. Steve waved as he drove off.

He stood at the door for a few moments after Hopper's car disappeared, dreading what was going to happen next.

He turned, resigned to the inevitable, and shut the door behind him. Billy, still in his seat, jumped at the sound of the door closing and stood up to face Steve.

"Harrington—"

"So, did we decide on dinner?" Steve said, walking past him and into the kitchen.

“Harrington,” Billy tried again.

“I think we ate all the pizza,” Steve said, poking his head into the freezer.

“Harrington.”

“There’s some frozen lasagna in here but it’s got to be about a year old at le—”

Billy pulled him back and spun him around to face him. “You know I’m bad at this shit, but you need to listen,” he said.

“To what?” Steve said, knocking his hands away.

“About all that college bullshit,” Billy said.

Steve, taking a card straight out of Billy’s book, fixed his eyes on a spot just over Billy’s head. “You don’t have to tell me anything. You said one month, and you’re out of here, right?”

Billy stared back. His jaw clenched and unclenched and his eyes were bright. “That’s right,” he finally said. “About two more weeks, I guess, and then I’m out of your hair.”

Steve turned back to the fridge and began rifling through it. “Like you were never even here.” He was glad he couldn’t see Billy’s face.

There was silence for a moment, then, “We could make some spaghetti.”

Steve’s hand clenched against the door. He shut it and looked at Billy. “Spaghetti sounds good.”

That night, Steve found Billy sitting on his bed with Steve’s figurine in his hand. Steve resisted the urge to snatch it away. Billy held it up to the light.

“This supposed to be you?” he asked, smiling slyly.

Steve sighed and held his hand out for it. "Yeah, you jerk." He bumped Billy's side so he'd make room on the bed and sat down next to him.

"Freakshows make it for you?"

"Yup." Billy placed it in his palm.

"What's the deal with the bat?"

Steve's body tensed. He shrugged, feigning disinterest. "Just how my bat is."

Billy looked at him incredulously. "Your bat just *happens* to have nails stuck through it?"

Steve smiled and his heart was racing. "It's a long story. Anyway, let's put this guy away and go to sleep, okay?" He pecked Billy on the lips. "The spaghetti was good."

Billy seemed to make the conscious decision to let himself be distracted.

"It was great," he corrected, lifting his shirt off and sliding off his pants.

Steve waited for Billy to get into the bed before flipping out the lights. He crawled in after him and laid down on his side, facing him.

He reached out for Billy's hand and intertwined their fingers. "What did Hopper mean, you were good at school? I thought you were failing your trig class." He waited.

Billy was silent for a long moment, staring at Steve's face. "I got better, I guess," he said finally.

Steve nodded, let go of Billy's hand, and rolled over. "Night."

Steve felt the feather-light touch of lips on his shoulder. "Good night."

The next day passed by quickly. Hopper dropped them off, tipping his hat as he drove away, and they began working immediately.

It felt nice to be together without having to speak, Steve thought. Billy had finally plugged the overturned radio back in and was keeping his comments about the music to himself for once.

At lunch, Steve stood back and surveyed the room. Most of it had been cleared away at this point. All that remained were a few storage shelves in the back, and then there was nothing left to do but clean.

Steve sat next to Billy on a pair of giant unearthed medicine balls and clinked their cokes together. He kept his distance, however. They were careful not to touch outside of the house.

“Can you believe this bullshit is almost over?” he asked.

Billy held his coke in one hand and his lighter in the other, and began flicking it open and shut, open and shut. “Good riddance,” he said, smiling at Steve over the rim of his bottle.

“Hey,” Steve said suddenly, nudging at Billy’s shoe with his own. “Geek squad wanted to go to the movies tonight. I kind of promised I’d take them. They need someone eighteen to buy their tickets.”

Billy grimaced, and Steve thought he was laying it on pretty thick. “What movie?”

Steve said it under his breath.

Billy leaned forward. “What was that?”

“Friday the 13th—”

“Fuck that.”

“—part five. A new beginning,” Steve said, and flared his hands dramatically before collapsing against Billy with laughter.

“They really want to see that shit?”

“Unfortunately.”

Billy took a sip of his coke and then shrugged. "I'd be willing to go."

Steve eyed him suspiciously. "Why do I feel like there's an 'if' at the end of that sentence?"

Billy licked his lips. "Because there is." He leaned in. "I'll go to the movies tonight, *if* you let me suck you off when we get home."

Steve choked on air and Billy laughed.

"Well," Steve said, pulling at his collar, "that can be arranged."

Billy looked him up and down. "It's a deal."

"What the fuck," Dustin asked, "was that?"

"Jason wasn't even in the movie!" Lucas said, throwing up his hands.

"Were you guys really expecting the fifth movie in a series to be *good*?" Billy asked.

"I didn't want good," Dustin replied, "I wanted Jason cutting off people's heads with a chainsaw! And there was no Jason!"

"What a joke," Mike said, scuffing his shoe against the concrete.

"What were they thinking?" Will wondered out loud, shaking his head.

Billy sighed. "It's just a bad rip-off of Halloween, anyway," he said. "Jason isn't half as scary as Michael Myers."

"You're," Dustin said, mouth agape and staring at Billy, "actually right."

The peaceful union of minds lasted only as long as it took Billy to say, "But *Nightmare on Elm Street* was better."

Steve watched, chewing on the straw from his fountain drink. "Who the fuck is Michael Myers?" he asked, just to get Dustin going again.

After standing around for fifteen minutes and being lectured on the merits of various horror movie franchise villains, Steve called it a night and packed the kids into his car.

“See you at the house,” he said, leaning in close to Billy before backing away, lifting his hand in a wave.

He shut the driver’s side door to his car and watched Billy’s disappearing back in the rearview.

Mike, Lucas, and Will kept squabbling about which villain was best (Mike roundly in the Mike Myers corner—name loyalty—while Lucas and Will were at odds over Jason and Freddy), but Dustin sat quietly in the passenger seat. “Billy’s actually pretty cool, isn’t he?” he said to Steve as he began to pull the car out of its spot.

Steve glanced at him and then back to his mirror. “I guess so,” he said cautiously.

“I mean,” Dustin continued, “when I first met him I thought, total tool. Who wears their shirts like that? But I guess I thought that about you too when I first met you.”

Steve let out a surprised laugh. “Yeah, I was a douchebag.”

“For sure,” Dustin agreed fervently. “Anyway, I just wanted to say,” he sat up straighter in his seat, “I approve of the two of you being friends. You have my permission to extend to him tentative secondary party benefits.”

“Secondary party benefits...? You’re making that up.”

“Am not,” Dustin shot back, “it’s in the contract.”

Steve scoffed. “Where in the contract?”

“The...back.”

Steve reached over and tousled his hair. “Tell the truth or I’ll have to push you out of the car.”

Dustin whacked Steve’s hands away and smiled. “Alright, alright, it’s

not in the contract. I'm just trying to say that I, that we wouldn't mind if Billy hung around more." Steve saw Mike, Lucas, and Will nodding in the backseat.

"He's okay," Mike added, shrugging.

"I like him," Will said simply.

"Not the worst person in the world I guess," Lucas admitted begrudgingly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Thanks for the ringing endorsement guys," Steve said, clenching his hands against the steering wheel, "but it's not like Billy will be around much longer."

Dustin nodded. "Well, you'll be going away for school too, won't you?"

Steve nodded tightly and flicked on the radio. It was Van Halen's "Jump."

"Ugh," Dustin said, "I hate this song."

Steve changed the station. "Me too, kid."

The lights were off in the house when Steve got home. He went in through the front door and set down his keys on a side table, while his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"Billy?" he called out.

No response.

He slipped off his shoes and tossed them aside, then padded through the living room on his way to the kitchen. He stopped as soon as he heard the muted sound of breathing.

Billy was on the couch, splayed out, with his arm dangling over the side. His eyes were shut tightly and his lips moved as his head shifted back and forth. He was having a nightmare.

Steve knelt next to the couch and ran his hand across Billy's face and into his hair. "Billy, shhh, Billy, you're having a nightmare." He shook his shoulder. "Wake up, babe, you're having a nightmare."

Billy jerked for a moment, inhaling sharply, and then relaxed again. His eyes opened and he smiled sheepishly. "Hey," he said, and his voice was thick with sleep.

"Hey yourself," Steve said. "Took a little nap, huh?"

Billy stretched like a cat and propped his head on his hand. "Got tired of waiting for you. You had too many rugrats to drop off."

Steve ran his hand down Billy's face and flicked his nose gently. "Their mothers are eternally grateful."

Billy grabbed his hand and bit the tip of a finger, waggling his eyebrows. "I know a better way to make them eternally grateful."

Steve snatched his hand away. "Ugh, Hargrove, you are so gross."

Billy raised his arms in the air and shrugged. "Mothers love me, man."

"Please stop."

Billy reached forward again, pulling hard, and Steve found himself kneeling over Billy's prone body.

"I do believe," Billy said, licking his lips and running his hands up Steve's thighs, "we had a deal."

"A deal?" Steve said, voice going high. "I don't seem to recollect a deal."

Billy's hand slid over to cup Steve's crotch. "Is this ringing any bells?"

Steve stifled a gasp. "Yeah, um, I'm starting to remember now, but you're going to have to keep reminding me."

Billy shifted to sit up, and his hands moved to Steve's belt buckle. He smiled and stared at Steve underneath his lashes as he slowly slid

Steve's belt off. "Remembering any better?"

Steve's hips jerked forward as Billy threw the belt to the floor and pulled open the button on his jeans. "Mm, a little."

Billy lowered the zipper. Steve licked his lips and Billy smirked as his hands slowly began to pull down Steve's pants. He had them mid-thigh before there was a knock at the door.

"Oh my god," Billy said, throwing his hands up to cover his face. "I ordered a fucking pizza."

Steve was already off Billy, pulling up his pants lightning fast. "You ordered a pizza?" he said incredulously.

"I was hungry!" Billy said, waving his hands in front of his face.

"You ordered pizza and then took a nap?" Steve said, shaking his head and pulling on a t-shirt.

"My wallet's by the door," Billy said, collapsing back against the cushions.

Steve, hoping he didn't look too obviously debauched, paid the pizza delivery man. He walked back over to Billy and stood silently, waiting for Billy to take his hands off of his face.

"Shut up," Billy said, voice muffled by his hands.

"I didn't say anything," Steve said, and his voice was shaking with laughter.

Billy sat up, shifted his legs off the sofa, and yanked Steve down next to him. "Eat the goddamn pizza."

He practically shoved a slice into Steve's mouth. "Was this part of that deal you were referring to, or...?" Steve asked, chewing happily.

"Shut up," Billy repeated.

After dinner, the pizza box lay abandoned on the floor. Billy had fallen back on the couch and pulled Steve on top of him.

Billy's eyes were closed, but Steve didn't think he was fully asleep yet. He glanced at the TV, then back at Billy's face. He wanted to test something.

He moved his hand, slowly, slowly, towards the zipper of Billy's jeans. He'd just managed to pull the button apart and slide the zipper down a few inches when Billy reached down and twisted his hand away.

"C'mon, Harrington," he whispered. "I told you I was gonna take care of you, first."

Steve tugged his hand back. "Yeah, but I haven't done anything for you at *all*."

Billy froze for a second, then sat up. He ran his hands through his hair, and sighed. "Why can't you just leave shit alone?"

Steve wasn't deterred. "What's your deal? You'll suck my cock, jerk me off, whatever, but I can't even touch yours once?"

"You've never been with a guy before," Billy said, and he sounded practiced, like he'd had this conversation a thousand times before in his head. "You don't have to do it just because you think it'll make me happy. I'm fine with the way things are."

Steve stared. "Do you think that's what I want? Everything for me, nothing for you? What kind of a relationship is that?"

Billy stared back. "We're not in a relationship."

Steve's heart trembled. "Do you think you're, I don't know, protecting me or something? Like people won't think I'm queer just because I never sucked a dick?"

Billy spread his legs and tilted up his chin. "Lots of guys think that way." He licked his lips. "It's not gay if it's someone doing it to you."

"So," Steve said. "You think I'm just like all those other guys. That

that's all I want."

Billy shrugged. "Doesn't really matter. It's all you're going to get."

Steve looked at Billy's face, but there was no sign of the Billy from earlier. Everything playful and warm had been wiped away, and all that remained was a Billy that reminded Steve of fists and blood.

"I'm going to bed," Steve said finally. The unspoken "Don't follow me" lay heavy between them as Steve hurried up the stairs, refusing to look back.

Billy wasn't there in the morning.

Steve nodded to himself, picked up the empty pizza box that was still on the floor, and threw it away. He couldn't tell if Billy had spent the night here, or if he'd left the moment Steve had gone upstairs.

He sat down in his dad's recliner, avoiding the sofa, and stared at the TV, wondering if he should even bother turning it on. All he could hear was the tick of the clock in the kitchen and the low hum of the refrigerator. It was strange how quickly he'd grown accustomed to the extra sounds of life in the house. He was so used to it just being him.

He considered his options. There was a six-pack of beer in the fridge that he thought he could get away with drinking. He had English homework to do. He could just lay on the couch and feel sorry for himself all day.

He looked to where he'd dropped his backpack on the floor after school on Friday and thought about the play they were reading in class. *Hamlet* felt very appropriate for how he felt at the moment—abandoned and alone. No Horatio in sight for Steve. Groaning at his own melodrama, he decided to finish his homework, and then spend the rest of the day wallowing. It seemed like a nice compromise.

By the time the sun was setting, he'd finished his math and lit homework, and had watched *The Thing* twice. He pulled the rental case off of the floor and looked at the cover before tossing it onto the

floor again. He still didn't get it. He had to hand it to Dustin, however. He was right—Billy's theory was bullshit.

His stomach grumbled and Steve realized the last thing he'd eaten was the greasy pizza from the night before. He sat up and staggered on stiff legs to the kitchen, searching through the cabinets for something fast and easy. Where was all the cereal?

He heard Billy come back in before he saw him. Steve peered around the open cabinet door as soon as he heard the rattle of the lock and his heart lurched when he saw the blood on Billy's hands.

Billy, noticing the direction of his glance, smiled and waved his hand in front of his face. "Don't worry, 's not mine."

Steve swallowed hard and shut the cabinet door. "I didn't say I was worried."

Billy laughed and leaned against the kitchen counter. "You didn't have to." He pointed at Steve's face. "It's all right there, baby."

Steve slapped his hand away and sighed, turning to the sink to turn on the hot water. "Whose blood is it then?"

Billy laughed again. "Huh, I didn't stop to get the dude's name. Probably Greg, or some other dumb shit name like that, honestly."

Steve held a rag under the hot water until it was soaked. He twisted the extra water away and motioned Billy over, who held out his hands obediently. "Are you drunk?" Steve asked quietly.

Billy nodded.

"You drove here like that?"

Billy nodded again. "Didn't," he coughed, "didn't think you'd wanna come pick me up from the place I was, Harrington. Too many undesirable types."

"Like you?" Steve asked, holding Billy's hand delicately and moving the rag between his fingers gently.

Billy blew out air sharply between his teeth and smiled. "I am the *king* of undesirables."

Steve hummed in agreement and surveyed his work. "At least it wasn't your blood this time," he said, letting Billy's hands fall away when he was satisfied he'd cleaned most of it away. "I'll go get some band-aids from the bathroom."

As soon as he left the kitchen he felt Billy at his back, arms tight around Steve's chest and shoulders. He turned Steve around. "Can't we just—" his eyes flickered around the room and back to Steve's face, "be together for a little while? Without any fights or bullshit? Just you and me?" He moved in close and brushed his face against Steve's. "I'll be gone soon," he whispered into Steve's hair. "Let me have this, please. For a few more weeks, let me have this."

Steve pulled back but let Billy's arms continue to encircle him. He looked into Billy's eyes and ran his hand across his bruised cheek, nodding. "Okay."

Billy closed his eyes tight for a moment and then bumped their foreheads together. "Okay."

Steve let his hand drop from Billy's face and then stepped back, grabbing one of Billy's hands as they fell. "I rented *The Thing*," he said. "Wanna watch it?"

Billy nodded and threw himself down on the couch, patting the spot next to him. "Of course. You've never seen it, right?"

Steve smiled as he pressed play on the VCR. "No, I was waiting to watch it with you."

The week passed by in relative peace. Steve didn't bring up wanting to touch Billy again, and conversations about their future, separate or otherwise, were nonexistent. The most controversial thing they spoke about was what to have for dinner.

Billy had strong opinions about food, but Steve could eat whatever. Every time Steve started to make something in the kitchen, Billy

would inevitably come in, sigh, and nudge Steve aside as he took over.

“You don’t trust me to boil water?” Steve had said, feeling amused as he leaned back against the counter and watched.

Billy, cigarette precariously perched on his mouth, had adjusted the temperature of the water and poured in a handful of salt. “Not a goddamn bit.”

Billy’s macaroni and cheese was so good that Steve had kissed him for it.

That Friday morning, Steve shook Billy awake. It didn’t take much—Billy was an incredibly light sleeper.

“Hey,” he said, smiling as Billy gazed up at him blearily. “My parents are going to be home today. We need to move your shit to the guest room.”

Billy waved his hand at Steve and tried to roll away, pulling the covers over his head. Steve laughed. “And we have to go to school.”

Billy waved his hand again and made disagreeing noises from underneath the blanket.

Steve sat up and moved off the bed. “This is how you want to do this?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm,” Billy replied.

“I’m pulling you off the bed now,” Steve said.

Billy’s head poked up from underneath the covers. “I’d really love to see you try, Harrington.”

Steve sighed and stretched. “Really didn’t plan on doing such a strenuous activity this early in the morning.”

Billy pulled the blankets down further. “I’ve got a different strenuous activity we could do,” he leered.

Steve shook his head. He reached down and latched onto Billy's arm with both hands. "You've got till the count of three."

Billy looked down at Steve's hands, and then back at Steve. "You've got to be kidding."

"Serious as a heart attack," Steve replied. "One."

"Oh, Harrington, this is a big mistake—"

"Two."

"Huge mistake."

At three, Steve pulled back as hard as he could and Billy, laughing helplessly in a way that Steve had never heard before, did the same. The tug-of-war lasted for about thirty seconds before Billy let himself be pulled off the bed, and the momentum sent both of them crashing to the ground.

"Ow," Steve said between his own hysterical laughter, "you asshole, that hurt!"

Billy rolled off of Steve and clutched his chest as he laughed. "You're not the one—with the bruised ribs—motherfucker!"

Steve stood and offered his hand to Billy, who allowed himself to be pulled up. They surveyed the room and Billy sniffed loudly. "Smells like sex in here."

"Ugh," Steve said, wrinkling his nose in distaste. "Open the windows then, you beast."

Billy did as he was told and then looked back at his things strewn across Steve's room.

"I'm going to go take a shower," he said. "Then I'll come back and deal with," he gestured across the room, "all of this bullshit."

"I don't understand why we even have to move my stuff," Billy called back to Steve as he made his way down the hall to the bathroom. "It's not like your parents give a fuck."

Privately, Steve agreed, but he was also afraid of what would happen if they did suddenly decide to give a fuck.

He lifted his blanket off of the floor and threw it back on the bed, and then figured he might as well throw all of Billy's stuff back in his suitcase as well. Billy would have to be the one to actually drag it into the guest room, however.

It was between tossing Billy's tennis shoes and jean jacket into the bag that he noticed the letters. He froze, and then went to the door to peer down the hall. The bathroom door was still shut, and he could hear the shower still running.

Heart racing, he turned around and reached into Billy's bag, pulling out a stack of three envelopes. They were all thick and had been opened carefully—no tears.

Steve picked up the first letter and held it in his hand. It was from UCLA. He picked up the second letter. The University of Chicago. He picked up the third letter. Michigan.

He didn't notice the absence of noise from the shower.

"Hey Harrington," Billy said suddenly from the doorway, "do you know where my—" He stopped speaking when he saw the letters in Steve's hand.

"I was just," Steve started, at the same time that Billy rushed forward and pulled them out of Steve's hand.

"My bullshit counselor made me apply for that shit," Billy said, shoving them back into his bag. "He can't mind his own fucking business for two seconds."

"It looks like you got in though, Billy," Steve said. His eyes were fixed on Billy's face.

"Like it matters," Billy scoffed. "Do you know where my jean jacket is?"

Steve pointed to the suitcase. "Thanks," Billy said. He took out the jacket and some other clothes and began changing. Steve looked

away.

“You going to shower?” Billy asked as he pulled his shirt over his head.

“Yeah,” Steve replied, standing up. “I was just going to pack some of your stuff up first.”

“I got it,” Billy said. “It’s my shit. Go shower.”

Steve nodded, but his eyes strayed back to Billy’s bag. Billy leaned forward and knocked his hand against Steve’s chest. “Go shower.”

Steve gave a small smile and sighed. “All of this better be cleaned up by the time I get back, Mr. Hargrove,” he said in his best impression of their school principal, Mr. Masterson.

“Oh, baby, you know how hot it gets me when you do the Masterson voice,” Billy said, fanning his face.

Steve laughed. “You’re repulsive. I’m going to shower.”

Despite Billy’s words about the acceptance letters – because that’s what they were, acceptance letters – Steve couldn’t help but let their names run through his mind like a litany. Chicago, UCLA, Michigan. Good schools. *Incredible* schools.

Steve thought about the distance as he watched Billy devour his cereal that morning. He laughed as coffee dripped down Billy’s chin and onto his shirt, and he ran upstairs to change. He watched as Billy twirled his keys in his hand while Steve locked the front door, and Steve felt a hollowness in his chest widen at the thought of ending this.

It was good that Billy was going to get away. It was just like Hopper said—someone like Billy didn’t belong in a town like Hawkins. He needed sunshine and oceans, skyscrapers, deep forests— not open fields and farms.

Steve could picture how it would be. Billy would love to go back to California, to be close to where his mother raised him. And he would be happy, and this time in Hawkins, this time with Steve, would fade

like an old photograph.

Hopper dropped them off that Saturday for their second to last community service. He helped them carry in buckets, mops, brooms, and what seemed like an entire store's worth of cleaning sprays.

He peeked his head in and nodded as he looked around the room. "Not too shabby," he said. "Just got a couple more boxes to move back there, and then you'll be home free."

Billy eyed the buckets and mops with distaste. "I wouldn't exactly call wiping down this shithole being home free."

Hopper gave him a friendly pat on the back. "Just look at it this way — you have to do it."

Billy scowled. "Was that supposed to be comforting?"

Hopper shrugged. "Not really." He turned around and headed out the door. "See you boys later today."

Steve and Billy could nearly taste their freedom as they scrubbed away grime from decades of disuse.

As they sat for lunch, Steve stared at his hands. "I expected the dirt," he said, turning them over, "but I didn't expect the mold, for some reason. So much fucking mold."

Billy nodded his head in agreement. "We've probably got some kind of disease now."

Steve laughed. "As long as I die after we've finished this, I'll die happy."

Billy leaned forward suddenly, splaying his hands apart on his knees. "You know what we've never done in here?"

Steve narrowed his eyes. "What?"

Billy reached out his foot to poke Steve in the ankle, and Steve

shifted his foot away suspiciously. “Fooled around,” he said, wagging his eyebrows.

“Fuck off, Billy,” Steve laughed.

“It’s so cute when you play hard to get,” Billy said, standing up and dusting off his pants. “C’mere.”

Steve grinned up at him from the floor. “I think I’m fine down here, thanks.”

“You want me to make you?” Billy asked, and Steve felt a shiver zip down his spine.

“You could try,” Steve said, shrugging and raising his coke to his lips.

Billy nodded and frowned contemplatively. “Well, you better put that bottle down, because I’m about to *try*.”

Steve shrugged again. “No one’s stopping you, Hargrove.”

Before he could even blink, Billy was on him, pulling him up.

“I said to come here,” Billy said lowly as Steve thrashed to get away. Steve had never really felt the way he did when he was with Billy. He was strong—from basketball, running, working out—he kept himself in shape. But Billy was stronger. There was a strange pleasure in being pushed around, in losing control, he had discovered, and Billy was always happy to indulge.

Steve was standing now, and Billy had used the momentum from his struggles to move them against a wall. He was close, so close, and his eyes kept flickering to Steve’s mouth.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he breathed against Steve’s lips, and Steve smiled.

“Like I said, no one’s stopping you.”

Billy leaned in, hard. He put both hands against the wall on opposite sides of Steve’s head and kissed him deep and long. Steve was grateful for the wall behind him, because otherwise the kiss would

have sent him shaking to the floor. Goddamn, Billy kissed dirty, like he was fucking Steve's mouth with his tongue.

Steve clutched Billy's shoulders and moved his knee between Billy's legs, rubbing against the hardness he found there. "Billy," he gasped, pulling away for a moment. Billy chased him with his mouth and Steve only gave in for a brief moment before breaking away again. "Please—let me—"

"What?" Billy asked, breathing hard. "What do you need?"

Steve pressed forward again against Billy. "Let me take care of you. For once. Please."

Billy's eyes went dark and Steve knew this was about to be over before it had even begun. He clutched harder at Billy's shoulders to keep him near. "Billy, just this one time. I want to. Please."

Billy leaned in close and kissed him hard again. "Okay," he said against Steve's lips. "Okay."

Steve's breath shuddered out of his body and his fingers felt clumsy as they undid the button on Billy's pants. Billy tucked his face into the side of Steve's neck and bit down as he felt Steve reach into his pants.

He's not wearing underwear, Steve noticed, feeling crazy and reckless and brave. Of fucking course.

"What—what do you like?" Steve asked as his hand fumbled along Billy's length.

Billy shook his head. "Whatever you want to do is good."

Steve could feel him trembling. He tried to think about what he liked, when Billy did this to him, when he did it to himself. He squeezed the bottom of Billy's cock before slowly sliding his hand up and rolling it across the top. Air hissed in from between Billy's teeth.

"Fuck, Harrington, just like that."

Steve, feeling more confident as Billy became limper and limper in

his arms, repeated the gesture, driving his hand up faster, twisting it as he moved, with his thumb making small circles against the tip.

Billy panted in his ear, and Steve moved their heads closer to catch Billy's mouth against his. Steve could feel Billy tense as he worked him over, and he moaned, low and deep into Steve's mouth as he came.

Steve whispered nonsense into Billy's ear, endearments he would never say outside of moments like this, as Billy's body shook with aftershocks of pleasure. "You were so good for me," he whispered into Billy's ear, kissing his hair, his cheek, everywhere he could.

Billy pulled away, and he looked shaken in a way Steve had never seen. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" Steve asked, zipping up Billy's pants for him carefully. "I can't believe you don't wear underwear. Jesus, Billy."

Billy raised an eyebrow in disbelief and seemed to come back to himself quickly. "You just had your hand on another man's dick and that's all you can say? Read the room."

Steve grinned and kissed Billy, furious with the joy of being close to him. "All I can say is that I'd like to do it again, if you'll let me."

Billy leaned in for his own kiss, gentle and soft. He reached up to trace the line of Steve's jaw, tender for a moment, before flicking it. "Maybe," he said, stretching out his arms again and curving his spine like a satisfied cat.

They spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning.

Steve couldn't help but smile as he looked at Billy. It felt like something new had opened up between the two of them, like one of Billy's hard earned barriers was finally gone.

Billy turned the radio on again and groaned. Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl" blasted out its small speakers.

He moved to change it but Steve slapped his hand away. "I happen to like Billy Joel," he said, swaying his hips to the song.

Billy sighed, and narrowed his eyes at Steve. "Of course you do."

"What?" Steve asked. "Why do you hate the Piano Man?"

"Shoot me," Billy said, turning back to his mop and bucket and ignoring Steve mouthing along to the lyrics.

As the song faded away, Steve pulled Billy towards himself and dipped him down in a kiss.

"You're in a mood," Billy said, grinning.

"Billy Joel does this to me," Steve said, lifting his shoulders and sighing. "What can I say."

Billy watched him for a moment as he moved the broom slowly across the floor, still humming the tune to "Uptown Girl."

"When are your parents leaving again?" he asked.

Steve leaned against the broom and shrugged. "Who knows. They come, they go, and I'm the last person they tell."

Billy twisted his mop in his hand. "I'm ready for them to be gone again, honestly."

Steve laughed. "That's an understatement. I'm sure they'll be gone again in a couple of days." He snapped his fingers. "That reminds me, I have to go by the laundromat on the way home. Pick some stuff up for my mom."

Billy began mopping again. "Well, I'll be going back to the house and hiding in the guest bedroom until you come home, I guess. I actually think your mom wants to fuck me at this point. I'll probably have to lock the door to keep her away."

"Ugh," Steve said, picking up a dirty rag and throwing it at Billy furiously. "Why are you this way?"

Billy dodged the rag easily and kept mopping. "You love it, asshole."

Steve looked away, and his chest felt tight. "Fuck off."

In the back of his mind, the now-familiar litany repeated itself: Chicago, UCLA, Michigan. One week.

Billy's car wasn't in front of the house when Steve got home.

"Mom? Dad?"

"In here, darling," Steve's mother called from the living room.

His mother was lounging on the glass with a martini in her hand. Steve frowned. "Mom, it's like three in the afternoon."

She looked at her drink and back at Steve, perplexed. "But I was thirsty, sweetheart."

Steve sighed and looked around the living room. "Where did Billy go?"

His mom frowned and took a sip of her drink. "That terribly handsome boy was here a little while ago, but then his father stopped by for a chat and they drove off together somewhere." She threw her hand in the air carelessly. "The father isn't much to look at. Must take after his mother."

"Billy's dad was here?" Steve asked, and his body felt numb.

"Yes, left about thirty minutes ago. So severe looking."

"He took Billy with him?"

"Steve, sweetie, you're repeating after me like a parrot. What's wrong? Billy's fine, he left with his own father for god's sake."

Steve's father stepped into the living room with a bewildered look on his face. "What's going on in here? Steve, why do you look as if someone died?"

"Nothing," Steve said, shaking his hand in dismissal. "I'm fine." He collapsed on the couch.

“Well,” his father said, eyeing him for a moment before sitting down as well, “I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about your future.”

“My future,” Steve repeated dully.

“There you go again, Steve darling, repeating everything we say. What’s the matter, dear?” his mother asked, crowding in close.

He pushed her away. “I said I’m fine.”

“The boy’s fine for god’s sake, Beatrice, stop coddling him.”

Steve’s mother moved away and picked up her drink again. She kept her eyes on the floor.

“You’ll be graduating soon,” his father said, “and I know we haven’t had a real conversation about it yet, but I’ve got a position for you all ready at work.”

The second Steve’s father said the word “future,” Steve was gone. In his mind he kept running over the same panicked thought: Neil has Billy. Neil has Billy. Neil has Billy. And there was nothing Steve could do. He didn’t think Neil would do anything to permanently hurt Billy—Billy had made it clear that Neil wanted the least amount of attention brought to the things he did to his son. But Steve wasn’t just worried about the physical toll that Neil was probably taking out on Billy, he was worried about the Billy from earlier that day. The Billy who had finally let him in, who had smiled and pretended not to sing along to Billy Joel, the Billy who held him so tight when they went to sleep at night. What was Neil doing to that Billy that Steve would have to painstakingly undo? Because he had to believe that he could undo it. Whatever Neil did, Steve had to believe it could be fixed.

“Steve? Are you listening?”

Steve snapped back to reality. His father’s face was in front of him, and his mother still only had eyes for her martini. “What?”

“I asked you,” his father said, sighing, “what your plan is for the future?”

Steve closed his eyes and held them shut for a long moment before opening them again. "I don't know," he replied.

"You don't know," his father repeated flatly.

"I'm eighteen," Steve said. "I barely passed my classes last year, but I still kind of want to go to college. The job you want me to do sounds safe, it sounds easy, but I think I'll die if I stay in Hawkins. I don't know what I want to do yet, Dad. Everything is just so crazy right now and," he let his head fall into his hands, "I don't know what I want."

Steve's father sat without speaking and the only sound was their breathing and the small sips Steve's mother took from her drink.

Finally, Steve's father stood up. "You need to figure it out, Steve. You're running out of time for getting away with such childish behavior."

Steve nodded and watched his father's back as he walked away, rigid and strong. His mother leaned over and patted his hand. "Your father means well," she said, and gave him a watery smile.

He held her hand in his and kissed it. "Thanks, Mom."

After sitting with his mother for a few more moments, he headed upstairs. He panic had turned in on itself and he now accepted what was happening with a sense of doomed inevitability. He kicked off his shoes and sat down on his bed. All he could do was wait.

"Harringtonnn, wake upppp."

Steve felt someone tugging on his shoulder. "What," he mumbled, rolling away.

"Wake up."

For a second, he pushed away against the voice, but then jolted awake as he realized who it was. "Billy?"

Billy chuckled. "In the flesh."

Steve fumbled for the light. Billy sat on the edge of the bed, and he looked normal—blessedly normal.

Steve grabbed his hand and pulled him forward into the light, looking him over. "Your dad, he didn't...do anything?"

"He didn't beat the shit out of me this time if that's what you're asking."

Steve's eyes drank him in. Billy didn't appear to be hurt, but he looked— strange. "Where have you been?"

"Well," Billy said, standing up and beginning to walk around the room. "My dad came here earlier, as you know. We went and talked – if you could call it talking – and then I drove around for a while and then I went to Jesse's. For a party."

Steve's brain struggled to keep up. "A party? Jesse?"

Billy nodded. "Jesse Stuart. Sweet girl, incredible ass. Almost fucked her tonight, but her folks came home early so we all had to skedaddle."

Steve felt something inside him crumble. "Why are you telling me that?" he asked.

Billy shrugged. "Why not?"

"Why not?" Steve repeated in disbelief, getting off the bed to stand in front of Billy. He reached out to touch his face but Billy stepped back. "Billy, what did your dad say to you?"

"Don't worry about it," Billy said. "I was going to wear a condom."

"I don't give a fuck if you were going to wear a condom. Christ!"

Billy held out his hands in exasperation. "Then I don't see what the issue is."

"Billy, you just came in here and told me you tried to fuck someone

else. What is wrong with you? What happened today? Earlier you were—”

“What?” Billy said, stepping in close, his face inches away from Steve’s. “Earlier I was what?”

“Happy,” Steve said, and he hated how gutted he sounded, how pathetic.

Billy laughed and it sounded like grinding glass. “Happy? Harrington, Harrington, Harrington. What we have together? Is nothing. There’s no future. It could never make me...happy.” He spat out the last word like a curse.

“Then what,” Steve said, spreading out his hands. “These past weeks have been—a trick? A lie? A joke? Is this all just a game for you?”

Billy leaned against one of the posts of Steve’s bed and sighed. “I don’t think you realize what a boring town Hawkins is, really.”

“So you were just *bored*?” Steve asked, voice shaking.

Billy shrugged again. “Your words, not mine.”

Steve backed away, as far as he could get from Billy. He couldn’t stand to be near him in that moment. “You need to leave. I know you’re lying, I know your dad did something to you or said something to you, and that you don’t mean this. But you need to leave. You need to get the fuck out of my house.”

Billy held up both his hands in front of him and smiled. “Came here to get my bag, Chief.”

Steve held his head in his hands. He couldn’t look at Billy. “Get out, get the fuck out.”

There was a beat, and then he felt more than saw Billy step towards him. “I guess this is it, then.”

Steve’s head shot up. “Which one is it?”

Steve saw a flash of something on Billy’s face for a moment, before it

flattened out again. "Which one is what?"

"Which school did you decide to go to? Chicago? California? Michigan? Which one?"

"I don't know why that matters right now."

Steve clenched his fists. "It'll make me happy to think of you somewhere else. Not you here, not now. Not like this."

Billy looked at the floor, then back up at Steve. His eyes were shining. "UCLA," he said. "I want to go home."

Steve held his arms across his chest, and felt like he was holding himself up. "That'll be nice. The ocean. Surfing, right?" He couldn't bring himself to smile. "You'll be close to your mom. I'm glad."

Billy stared and his next words came out like a whisper. "We said one month, right?"

Steve nodded. "You're right. I just—I guess I thought something else for a little while."

Billy swallowed hard. "I guess I did too." He turned slightly towards the door, but then looked back. "You won't see me at school anymore. I'm taking my finals and then I'm a ghost."

Steve walked back until his knees hit the edge of the bed. "I'll convince Hopper to not rat you out for Saturday. I'm sure eight of nine weekends should be enough for him."

Billy smiled, and for a moment, Steve could swear it was real.

"Thanks for letting me crash here, Harrington."

Steve felt the weight of all the words he wanted to say fall away like ash on his tongue. "You're welcome, Billy."

And then he was gone.

The last week of school went by in a daze. Nancy, of course, knew something was wrong the moment she saw Steve on Monday. “What happened?” she asked, pulling him down a quiet hallway between classes. “Steve, you look sick.”

“I’m fine,” he protested. “I think I caught a bug.” He coughed for good measure.

Nancy wasn’t fooled.

“Steve,” she said, and she turned his head so he had to look at her. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” he insisted, pulling away.

“Does this have to do with Billy?” she asked, and her eyes were solemn and wide.

Steve didn’t say anything. She sighed. “I hoped you guys would be good for each other,” she said sadly, staring down at her notebook in her hands. “Guess things don’t always work out how you want them to.”

Steve looked at her and felt the weight of their history on his chest, with the added pain of Billy between them now as well. “No, it doesn’t.”

He walked away.

Billy kept his word about seeing each other at school. Steve would catch brief glimpses of him as he turned down a hall, or as he got into his car. He wondered where Billy was sleeping, if he had gone home, if he was safe—until he had to stop and remind himself that it wasn’t his business anymore what Billy Hargrove did, and it never would be again.

Steve nearly sleepwalked through his finals. He felt sure that he did well in his math class, and with some last minute tutoring from Nancy in English, he was coming out with a strong B. He breezed through his other classes, sure he would at least pass and not caring enough to actually try hard. Steve walked out of his last day in high school and he felt nothing but relief.

Friday night he lay in his bed, thinking about the end of this chapter of his life. He knew with a sudden aching clarity that he had to get out of Hawkins, and that his future wasn't here. There were too many shadows and nightmares and memories. He would come back—he had to come back, for Dustin and the other kids, for his parents—but he also had to leave for himself.

He sat up and walked downstairs. The light was still on in his father's study. He knocked gently on the door and then opened it. His dad turned in his chair, and gave a small smile. "It's kind of late for a chat, isn't it Steve?"

Steve nodded, but his heart was racing. "Yes. Well, no. I—I just came down here to say I know what I want to do. Or rather, what I don't want."

Steve's father sat up straighter in his chair. "I'm listening."

"I can't—be who you want me to be. At least, not right now. I need to go. Not forever," he said, holding out his hands to forestall his father's protests, "but just for a while. Maybe to New York, Chicago, I don't know. Somewhere that isn't Hawkins." His father frowned, but he stayed quiet, listening. "I need to figure out what I want to do with my life before I fuck it up by doing what *other* people want me to do. Do you understand?"

His father leaned back in his chair and brought his hands together thoughtfully. "I think you're being an idiot," he said bluntly, and Steve felt his body shrink in on itself. "But I also was once an eighteen year old. I let myself be...led around by people and told what to do. I don't regret my life," he gestured around his office, and at Steve, "but I do wonder sometimes, what if?" He waved his hand at Steve. "Spend a year in New York, Florida, wherever. Find yourself. I won't give you forever to do it, but you can have some time. I don't want you to have my what-ifs."

Steve swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. This was the longest conversation he'd had with his father in years. "Thanks, Dad," he said.

His father nodded, looked at him a moment longer, and then turned

back to his desk.

“Shut the door on your way out, son.”

It felt strange to be in the storage room alone that Saturday.

When Hopper had dropped him off that morning, it had been with nothing more than a raised eyebrow, and Hopper pointedly handing him one bucket instead of two. Steve guessed Billy must have said something to Hopper himself about not coming, instead of depending on Steve.

He couldn't bring himself to turn on the radio, and he enjoyed the mindlessness of the work. They had emptied out the rest of the equipment the weekend before, and all that remained was touching up the space before they – *he* – was officially done.

He ate lunch by himself, sipping on his coke, and hating the silence. He craved a cigarette, and he knew Billy would laugh at him for it.

When the afternoon came to an end, he gave the room one last long look before shutting the door behind him. It was spotless. He felt sure he'd worked off that ticket and more, with all the shit he'd had to deal with in there. He heard a car approaching and he turned, ready to get into Hopper's truck and never come back to that place again.

It wasn't Hopper.

It was Billy.

The Camaro roared to a stop outside of the storage room and Steve stupidly looked down the gravel driveway to see if Hopper was following. There was no one else in sight.

The driver's door to the Camaro slammed shut and Steve's attention was drawn back to Billy.

Billy, who was now right in front of him. Billy, who Steve hadn't seen for a terrible empty week.

“You were right,” Billy said, and he said it so easily that Steve wanted to punch him, wanted Billy’s blood on his hands again, just for a moment.

“About what?”

Billy smiled and tilted his head in that way that Steve loved. “Everything, really. But specifically, that I was lying. You were right.”

Steve dropped the bucket on the ground and clutched Billy’s jacket. “You said one month.”

Billy nodded, pulling Steve’s hand away and holding it tightly in his. “I was lying.”

“You said you didn’t care about me, that what we had was nothing.”

Billy winced and squeezed Steve’s hand. “A really bad lie.”

“You were going to—fuck that girl.”

Billy pulled Steve in close and hid his face in Steve’s neck. “I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.”

Steve allowed himself to be close to Billy for a long moment, savoring the feel of him again, before pulling away. “I need to say something. Whatever happened with your dad—that can’t happen again. You can’t...you can’t do this to me ever again. Do you understand?”

Billy leaned in and brushed Steve’s hair back out of his face. “When my dad came by last Saturday I was—I was so fucked up. He didn’t hit me and,” he shook his head, “somehow that was worse. He told me that you couldn’t love me, because faggots can’t love, and that you were going to—I was going to—”

Steve put his hand gently over Billy’s mouth. “I don’t need to know what that nothing thinks about me or you. I just want you to tell me that you won’t ever leave me like that again. Okay?”

Billy sighed and leaned his head against Steve’s chest. “I swear to god, I won’t. I won’t do that ever again. It was horrible. God, your fucking face. I thought I was going to die.”

Steve ran his hands through Billy's hair. "The feeling was mutual, dickbag."

Billy laughed against his chest, and then lifted his head back up.

"There is one thing I wasn't lying about," Billy said, and his eyes were afraid for the first time. "I really am going to California." Steve had known that part was true, had felt Billy's sincerity, but still, hearing it again so soon after getting Billy back was excruciating.

"I want you to come with me," Billy said, and Steve didn't even have to ask to hear him again. The words rang around in his head like a bell.

There was a long pause as Steve reached out to trace his hand along Billy's still bruised cheek.

"I'll have to say bye to Dustin and everyone before I go," he said finally.

Billy grabbed his hand and kissed it.

"And I have to go to my house and get all my clothes. Does it ever get cold in California?"

Billy shook his head. "Not really."

Steve sighed, and held up a hand to his mouth, thinking. "This requires a completely new wardrobe."

Billy punched him in the shoulder. "Shut the fuck up or I will leave you."

"How do people feel about pastels in California?"

They moved towards the car, and Billy held the passenger door open for Steve. "We're not big fans of it."

Steve looked thoughtful for a moment. "Do you think I should get my ear pierced?"

Billy's voice sounded strangled. "Do you want me to crash this car?"

“No, you asshole, I want you to kiss me,” Steve said, yanking Billy towards him from the passenger seat.

They broke away and Billy smiled, shaking his head. “I can’t believe I ever stopped kissing you.”

Steve rolled down his window as Billy pulled away and let the cool spring air wash over his face. “Are they all as stupid as you in California?”

Billy pinched his shoulder before reaching down to rest his hand against Steve’s thigh.

“You love it.”

Steve smiled, and there was nothing secret or small about it. It blazed.

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

Notes for the Chapter:

holy christ, this chapter killed me. and by chapter i mean, chapter that is longer than the entirety of the other three combined??????? whattttttt was i thinking. i just kept thinking, i wanna post it in one go. i want this done, and out there, so i can finally rest and watch season four of peaky blinders. and here i am.

1. stole the idea for the billy joel thing from flippyspoon on tumblr. it was just too good an image to resist!
2. thank you everyone for reading this. this is actually my first full chaptered fic i've ever finished and im so excited to share it with you.
3. hope everyone has a great holiday.

thank you for reading!!!